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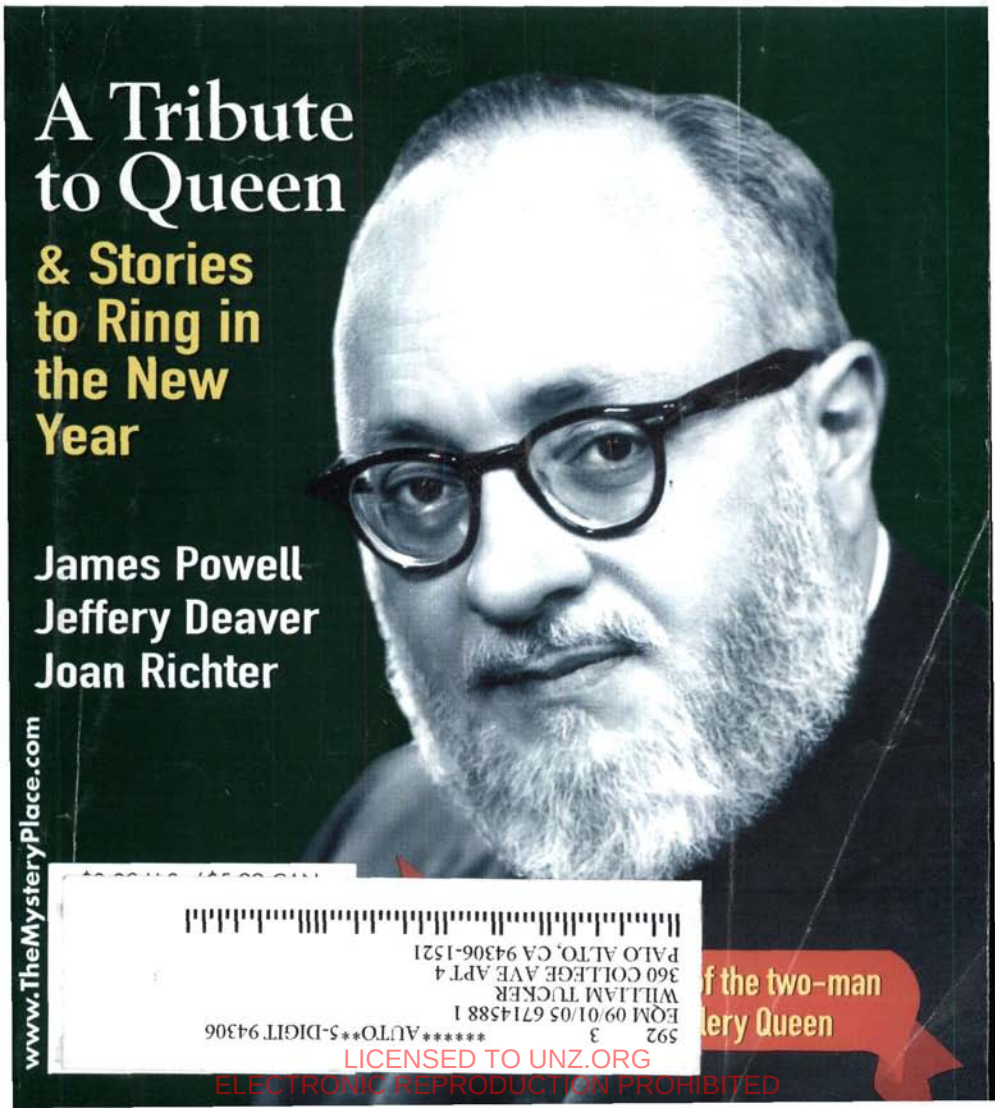

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& Stories to Ring in the New Year

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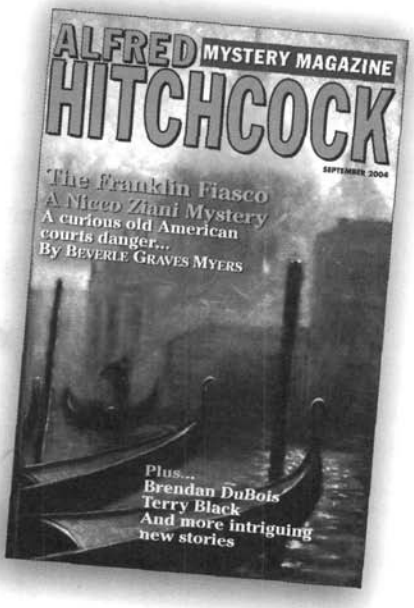

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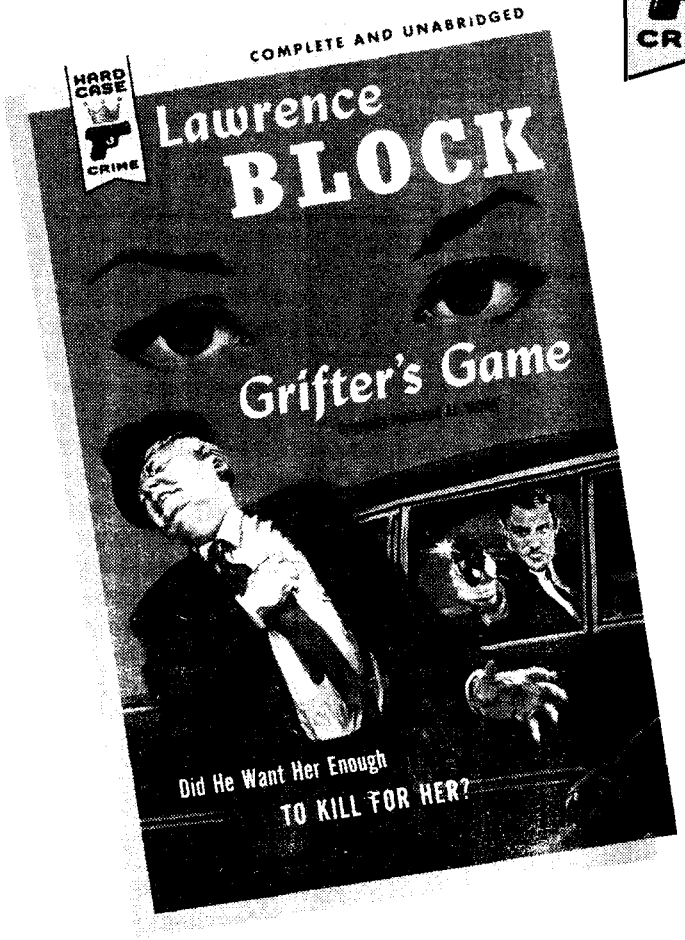

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With this issue EQMM kicks off a year of celebration of the writing/editing duo the world knows as Ellery Queen. As creators of one of the classic characters of detective fiction, as founders of this magazine, as scholars of the mystery, and as authors of the bestselling American crime fiction of their time, they richly deserve commemoration on what would have been their hundredth birthdays. The special features included in this and subsequent issues for 2005 include reprints of the original Ellery Queen stories, an Ellery Queen pastiche, articles on the Ellery Queen movies, TV shows, and radio plays, and excerpts from the authors' correspondence. We start with an overview of the achievements of the Queen team by EQMM's own book reviewer, Jon L. Breen.

On the Centenary of Ellery Queen

by Jon L. Breen

The year 2005 marks the centenary of two Brooklyn-born first cousins who comprised arguably the most artistically and commercially successful collaboration in literary history. Before they became Ellery Queen, appropriately to men of mystery, they already had adopted individual pseudonyms. Manford Lepofsky, born January 11, 1905, became Manfred Bennington Lee. Daniel Nathan, born October 20, 1905, became Frederic Dannay. While working in Manhattan in the 1920s, Lee as a movie publicist and Dannay as an advertising writer and art director, they decided to enter a magazine contest offering a $7,500 prize for a detective novel. Though they were unofficially told they had won, they were done out of the prize when the magazine went broke and its successor picked another winner. But *The Roman Hat Mystery,* about detective Queen and signed by author Queen, was published in book form in 1929. Thus began a remarkably successful, if often stormy and combative, partnership that would last more than forty years.

That first novel was followed by several more with the nationality/object title pattern, from *The French Powder Mystery* (1930) to *The Spanish Cape Mystery* (1935). In one remarkable year, 1932, the team published four novels that are considered classics of pure detection: *The Greek Coffin Mystery* and *The Egyptian Cross Mystery* as Ellery Queen, and, under their secondary pseudonym Barnaby Ross, the first two novels about deaf actor/sleuth Drury Lane, *The Tragedy of X* and *The Tragedy of Y.* With the identities of both bylines a closely guarded secret, the cousins took to the lecture circuit wearing masks, Lee as Queen and Dannay as Ross. The Ross byline was retired after four books with *Drury Lane's Last Case* (1933). The true identities of both Ross and Queen were finally revealed in 1936.

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The Queen novels of the late thirties, from *Halfway House* (1936) to *The Dragon's Teeth* (1939), marked a transitional period in which the team tried to make their product more attractive for slick-magazine serialization. *Calamity Town* (1942), first of several books set in the small New England town of Wrightsville, launched their peak period of the 1940s and '50s, including the serial-killer classic *Cat of Many Tails* (1949); one of the best Hollywood mysteries, *The Origin of Evil* (1951); a courageously anti-McCarthyite allegory, *The Glass Village* (1954); a sensitive look at the problems of the retired, *Inspector Queen's Own Case* (1956); and the nostalgic look backward that was originally planned as Ellery's last case, *The Finishing Stroke* (1958).

Early in their collaboration, the partners settled on a division of labor: Dannay would prepare detailed outlines of the complex puzzle plots, characters, and incidents; Lee would expand these into novels and short stories. Though this collaborative process produced some of the finest detective fiction of the twentieth century, it was never an easy one. In a 1967 interview in *MD* magazine, Lee said, "We have basically different attitudes toward the detective story," and Dannay added, "We have basically different attitudes toward everything."

Both men were serious about literature, but they differed on how much the formal detective story, as perfected during the Golden Age between the World Wars, could be taken seriously *as* literature. Dannay thought it could, but Lee, in private correspondence, expressed doubts. Queen's greatest achievement may be a by-product of this tension between Dannay and Lee. They always moved with the times, incorporating current cultural and political references, adding psychological depth, and addressing increasingly serious themes in their novels, while never deserting the fully-clued, fair-play puzzle they had raised to an art in their earliest works. Dannay would never allow the formal structure to be lost, while Lee became more and more determined to get political, social, and psychological themes into the mix.

While this body of creative work was being produced, Ellery Queen had an equally significant parallel career as editor and scholar, producing a pioneering bibliographic work on the detective short story, many anthologies, and, of course, this magazine, which has been regularly published since 1941. While most of these achievements were the sole work of Dannay, that was not true from the beginning. Several years before the debut of *EQMM,* Ellery Queen edited the high-quality pulp magazine *Mystery League,* which lasted only four issues in 1933 and 1934. The masked Queen pictured in the first issue was Manfred Lee, and by Lee's account, in a 1969 letter to *The Armchair Detective,* the two shared the workload: "[W]e were its entire staff—you read me—*entire;* we did

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not even have a secretary. We selected the stories, prepared copy, read proofs, dummied, sweated, etc., and almost literally swept out the office as well. . . . All this was some thirty-five years or so ago, and the pain is only just beginning to ebb." This may partially explain why Lee left most of the later editorial projects to Dannay.

Radio was Lee's bailiwick. He handled the business details and, when other demands caused Dannay to give up his accustomed plotter's role on the radio scripts, Lee worked with Anthony Boucher and other writers. Two volumes of true-crime essays, collected as *Ellery Queen's International Case Book* (1964) and *The Woman in the Case* (1966), were Lee's sole work. When a severe writer's block and other health problems caused Lee to relinquish the writing of Queen novels for a time in the 1960s, Dannay worked with other collaborators, notably science-fiction writers Theodore Sturgeon and Avram Davidson.

By the last Ellery Queen novel, *A Fine and Private Place* (1971), Lee had returned to his customary role in the partnership. He died on April 3 of that year. Fred Dannay wrote no more fiction but continued to edit *EQMM* until his death on September 3, 1982.

Anthony Boucher wrote, "Ellery Queen *is* the American detective story." When all of their achievements are totaled up, and the ripple effect of their influence both artistically and editorially is factored in, the statement is clearly no exaggeration. But what if there had been no Ellery Queen? What if Fred Dannay and Manny Lee had seen that contest announcement, briefly considered collaborating on an entry, but decided, no, it wasn't worth the trouble? What if they had foreseen not success and fame but inevitable friction, their differences in personality and outlook, their strong egos dooming any effort at literary partnership and only destroying a beautiful friendship? What, in short, if they had decided to concentrate on their day jobs?

Would someone else have set the standard for detective fiction that is both fully classical in the best Golden Age puzzle-spinning, clue-planting tradition and fully American? Would someone else have brought the intellectual challenges of pure detection to radio and television? Would someone else have taken their formative role in the early days of Mystery Writers of America? Would someone else have collected, celebrated, and catalogued a vast library of mystery short stories, keeping alive bylines great and obscure? Would someone else have provided the outlet for high-quality crime fiction of all types that is this magazine? How many careers would never have happened and how different would the field be today if there had been no Ellery Queen? How would the mystery short story have developed—or not? The answers are too depressing to contemplate.

For a bibliographic note on Ellery Queen see p. 73 (The Jury Box).

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Happily for us, the two cousins who wrote as Ellery Queen were born in the same year, making it possible to dedicate 2005 to the centenary of the team, not one or other individual. But for the month of each writer's birthday, we've set aside a cover and a special page for him alone. This month it's Manny, born January 11, 1905. EQMM interviewer Steven Steinbock, one of Manny's special fans, lets us into the world of the quiet, scholarly writer.

Getting to Know Manny Lee

by Steven E. Steinbock

There was Gilbert and Sullivan. Then there was Rogers and Hart. In-between were the two cousins who came together as Ellery Queen. Fred was the better known of the two, editing *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and hobnobbing with the mysterious literati of New York. But Ellery Queen would not be Ellery Queen without Manfred B. Lee.

So who was Manny Lee? Attempts to compare the Dannay/Lee partnership with other famous collaborations won't get us very far. If Ellery Queen were the Beatles, which one would be Lennon and which McCartney? Both Fred and Manny could compose beautifully, and both were strong-willed men with strong opinions. Perhaps Fred, being the more gregarious of the two, was more the public face and spokesman of Ellery Queen. And Manny, whose job was to put flesh on the vertebrae of Fred's detailed plot summaries, was perhaps the more aesthetically astute of the two. But even these distinctions between the two men are simplistic and unfair.

If the world had been different back then, Manfred B. Lee might never have existed. In a more accepting, alternate universe, the child born in 1905 to Mr. and Mrs. Lepovsky might have grown up to be Professor Manford Lepofsky of New York University's Department of English Literature. But such was never to be the case. Manny's son Rand, in an essay in the collection *A Tragedy of Errors* (Crippen & Landru, 1999), recalled the story of how his father fell from the ivory towers of academia. After graduating summa cum laude in English, "he told his beloved faculty advisor and mentor, Dr. Munn, that his big dream was to become a professor of English at the college level. Dr. Munn looked at him and said, 'Manny, no Jew will ever get tenure in the New York University system.' It was Munn's attempt to protect my father from humiliation, but for my father, it was the expulsion from Eden." It was around this time that Manny had his name legally changed from "Manford Lepovsky" to "Manfred Bennington Lee."

Despite the name-change, and while never being a religious man, Manny never hid from or denied his Jewishness. But for Manny, being Jewish was expressed not in religious observance or synagogue attendance, but in progressive politics. He was an outspoken advocate of

continued on page 105

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EDWARD AT THE EDGE

by John Morgan Wilson

"He asked to borrow my gun," Harry said.

"My God!" Cynthia turned to him, her dark eyes widening. "When?"

"Last night, as he walked the dog. He stopped by, said he wanted to talk. Made up some story about an intruder, down at your place. Said he needed a gun for protection until he could get one of his own." Harry tugged at his well-trimmed beard, smiling mischievously. "You and Edward haven't had any intruders lately, have you, Cynthia?"

She rolled her eyes. "As if Edward would ever have the backbone to shoot one. Or do anything else even slightly out of the ordinary."

"Except what we have in mind for him," Harry said.

Her voice rose with excitement. "You really think he could do it?"

"When you think about it, for someone like Edward, it's the most logical step in the world."

She tapped him on his strong, patrician nose, grinning impishly. "Dr. Harry Braxton, putting his brilliant psychiatrist's mind to the task."

"Brilliant might be an overstatement," Harry said, with just the right touch of modesty, while leaving room for doubt.

Cynthia grew quiet, listening to a Miles Davis classic playing on Harry's state-of-the-art sound system, the kind she and Edward could have purchased years ago if he hadn't been so ridiculously frugal. It was Harry who'd introduced her to jazz, in this very room, one afternoon during a visit when Edward had wandered down the street looking for bargains at a neighborhood garage sale. She never played jazz when Edward was home; he said it

Edgar winner John Morgan Wilson appeared on the mystery scene in 1996 with the novel that introduced series character Benjamin Justice, an amateur sleuth whose investigations probe the darker side of human nature. The sixth book in the series, *Moth and Flame,* was recently released in hardcover (St. Martin's). Mr. Wilson has also penned two lighter, nostalgic mystery novels with bandleader Peter Duchin: *Blue Moon* and *Good Morning, Heartache.*

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made him nervous. When it came to music, the most adventurous Edward got was Kenny G. Cynthia shuddered, thinking about all the years she'd wasted with timorous, mild-mannered Edward since their wedding just after graduate school. At least she'd been able to share these last few years with Harry, even if they had to sneak around, stealing intimate moments with the shades drawn.

"So I wrapped my Ruger in a towel and gave it to him," Harry said, deliberately sounding nonchalant, while working to keep a degree of confidence and authority in his voice, knowing the powerful effect it had on her. "It's a nine-millimeter. Nice gun, blue plate, doesn't weigh much. Bought it on impulse from a catalog last year." He shrugged casually, for extra effect. "Don't ask me why."

"That's one of the things I like about you, Harry. That passionate, impulsive nature of yours. Following where your heart leads you."

He grabbed her and surprised her with a kiss. "Like that?"

"Exactly like that." They kissed again, longer this time, before she asked him, "Was it loaded? The gun, when you gave it to Edward?" When he nodded, Cynthia's lovely face grew somber. She turned away, toward the picture window that looked down the hill at the three-bedroom house she and Edward had shared for nearly a decade. She'd wanted a house up here, with a view like this, but Edward had balked at the prices. "You were right, Harry. He's thinking about doing it."

Harry smoothed down the corners of his thick, blond moustache with the thumb and forefinger of the same hand, feeling almost giddy. "Oh yes, I'm sure of it. Edward's at the brink. All he needs is a push."

"You're the psychiatrist, Harry." She laughed, but it was false, a tad frightened. "Who would know better than you?"

"Also his best friend since high school. Don't forget that. If anyone understands what makes Edward Strathmore tick, it's Harry Braxton."

He went to her, slipped an arm around her soft shoulders, kissed the delicious nape of her neck. Together, they stared down at the house, where Edward could be seen in the backyard, weeding his garden with dreadful precision. Such a neat, tidy house, she thought, with the shutters so free of dust, the borders of the yard so perfect, the lawn so carefully clipped. Neat, tidy, and boring, just like Edward. Just like their childless marriage. Just like their tedious life. She tried to think of what it was about him that she'd once loved and admired. She couldn't, except perhaps his utter devotion and dependability. Funny how people change, she mused, how their needs and desires and dreams change. Except for Edward, of course, who had about as much imagination as an accountant, which happened to be his chosen trade.

"It's still hard to envision Edward going through with it," Cyn-

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thia said. She laughed grimly. "It would be so out of character, so upsetting to his routine."

"*Au contraire,* my dear. Suicide is the ultimate act of control, a way of bringing order and finality to unbearable feelings of chaos and despair." They watched him move to another row of flowers, plucking weeds robotically, the way he did every Saturday morning from ten to twelve. "Edward's deeply depressed. Always has been, truth be told. He's managed to get by all these years, to cover it up, through his obsessive orderliness. But now he's at a point when he senses things aren't working out. He's terrified that he's losing control, particularly where you're involved."

She glanced up into Harry's handsome, bearded face. Like Edward, he was not quite forty, yet there was still a youthful, robust quality about him that thin, pale Edward had never exhibited, not even during their university days. She'd urged Edward to grow a moustache and buy some stylish clothes, then to trade his spectacles for contacts, finally to let people call him Ed or Eddie. Edward had reacted each time as if she'd suggested something as radical as a sex change.

"I've pulled away from him," she said. "Little by little, the way you suggested. He seemed confused at first, just as you said he would. Lately, he's seemed more troubled."

"Because he worships you, darling." Harry brushed the luxuriant dark curls off her ear, gently nibbled the alabaster lobe. "Can't say that I blame him. Lucky, undeserving bastard, to have you all these years."

She arched her shapely brows. "You really believe that Edward worships me? That he has feelings that strong?"

Harry nodded. "He spoke of it just last week, while we were shopping for fertilizer. The distance he feels between the two of you—it's pure anguish for him, and it's eroding what's left of his low self-esteem. I'm telling you, Cynthia, he's right at the edge. He just needs something to push him over."

Her eyes flickered with dark amusement. "Something—or someone?"

"It's time," Harry said, with that assurance and resolution that made him so attractive to her. "Time to tell him you're going to leave him, that you no longer love him and never will again. He'll blame himself, of course. He'll beg you to give him another chance, promise to behave differently, do anything you ask."

"And I'll stand firm, telling him that life with him is unbearable. That it's time for a change." She thought about the money she and Edward had saved at his insistence, invested conservatively and piling up, when they might have used it to travel or buy a sports car or collect fine art, as Harry did. She thought of the equity in the house, sizable because Edward had studied the real-estate

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market so prudently and purchased at the right time in the right neighborhood. She thought of the life-insurance policy Edward had insisted on taking out on himself, as the primary breadwinner, its suicide clause expired now that the policy had reached its three-year point. There was even a generous trust fund—Edward's inheritance—that they'd never touched. Well over two million dollars in sum, waiting to be spent.

Down the hill, in their square backyard, he rose at the end of the flowerbed, brushed soil off the knees of his discount pants exactly as she knew he would. Right on cue, he dropped a handful of weeds into one of the Hefty bags he purchased in bulk to save money, the ones he stored with all the other items he bought on sale and stacked in his well-organized garage.

She shuddered in revulsion. "Change—there's nothing Edward detests more than change."

"Exactly," Harry said.

At dinner that night, Cynthia informed Edward that their marriage was over. Predictably, he was distressed but kept his emotions under a tight wire, without weeping or even raising his voice. Just as Harry had foreseen, Edward begged her to reconsider, imploring her to give him another chance. She refused to discuss it, telling him her decision was irrevocable. Not surprisingly, he insisted on doing the dishes.

It was just what he'd done at other points of tension throughout their marriage—tend to the kitchen, mow the lawn, paint the patio furniture, reorganize the garage—much the way he rearranged and compartmentalized his feelings, as if they were so many loose screws needing nothing more than placement in the proper cabinet drawers. It had driven her nearly to madness, until now. Now, it couldn't have pleased her more, since it fit so nicely into the plan she and Harry Braxton had concocted over the past couple of years, in the spare minutes they stole while entangled in the luxurious silk sheets of Harry's big bed after their rapturous lovemaking. Harry had moved to this neighborhood to be close to his best friend, Edward, whose instinct for stability was something the more mercurial Harry had felt he needed in his own life. But Harry had stayed because he'd fallen in love with Cynthia, as she had fallen in love with him. At first, they'd kept their relationship at a distance, waving discreetly up and down the hill to each other when they felt it was safe. Later, she'd taken up power-walking for fitness, which had allowed her to trek up for the occasional rendezvous with her beloved, which had left them aching for one another, almost desperately, in-between their hurried trysts.

Edward would never grant her a divorce, they both knew that. He was Catholic, for one thing. But even more than that, such a

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drastic alteration in the seamless pattern of his life would be unthinkable. Cynthia could have left him, of course, but with nothing to show for the precious years she'd sacrificed to his numbing monotony. So Harry Braxton, a psychiatrist with special insight into Edward's tepid personality, had come up with a bold and foolproof plan. When Edward was finally gone—conveniently removed from their lives by his own hand—they'd move away, marry, and begin living life in a way that Edward was incapable of, financed by the money he'd so diligently hoarded. Diabolically clever—that's how Harry had characterized it—although a trace of concern nagged at her, faint but persistent, like an unsolved line in one of Edward's Sunday crosswords.

After dinner, while Edward washed and dried the dishes—a dishwasher, he'd long ago decided, was wasteful of power and water—Cynthia took a walk. Ten minutes after leaving the house, winding her way up the hill, she was in Harry's muscular arms. His kisses were forceful, uninhibited, molten, with all the spontaneity and passion Edward could never muster. After making furious love that was consummated by necessity within minutes, they peeked through the curtains of Harry's bedroom window. Down the terraced hill, through the kitchen window, they could see Edward wiping the sink and countertops with a paper towel that he spread out afterward to dry and be used again.

Cynthia slipped a hand around Harry's waist. "When do you think he'll do it?"

"Not right away. He'll have to ponder it awhile. And he'll want to put all his affairs in order, feel completely in control before he pulls the trigger."

"I dread finding his body. That's the part I fear the most."

"Don't worry, darling. He won't do it at home. He wouldn't want to make a mess. And he'll be thinking about you—he wouldn't want you to find him that way."

She chuckled uncomfortably. "Edward's considerate to a fault. I'll give him that."

"Besides," Harry went on, "he knows that a suicide in a house can bring its property value down. Full disclosure required of the seller, and all that. Edward could never stand the thought of that, not when renting a cheap motel room or driving to the secluded seashore would be so much more practical."

Cynthia turned to Harry, suddenly alarmed. "What if they figure out that we drove him to it? Can we be arrested, Harry? Can we be charged with anything?"

His laughter was rich, warm. "Sometimes you're as silly as you are beautiful."

"Don't make fun of me, Harry. I'm scared, that's all."

He pulled her closer, rubbing her bare arm. "Of course you are.

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It's a serious business, what we're up to. But there's no possible way they can find us criminally culpable. Think about it—a man who's obsessed with control realizes his marriage is coming apart, just as he's facing forty. He borrows my gun, which is registered and legal, fearing a burglar. Nothing so unusual in that."

"But you're a psychiatrist. You'd never loan a gun to an emotionally troubled man, least of all a friend."

"My talks with Harry have been purely confidential. Should someone ask, I'll say he seemed the most well-adjusted fellow in the world. For all appearances, he was. As far as any pressure that you've placed on him, no one knows about that. Edward's the last person to share his troubles with anyone."

"Except his closest friend," she said, a smile tugging at the corners of her pretty mouth. "You think of everything, don't you? You sexy scoundrel."

"Didn't you tell me that he recently increased his life insurance?"

"Doubled it. Is that a problem?"

"Not at all," Harry said. "It will look like the final act of a man contemplating the end of his life, and leaving behind some extra financial security for his grieving widow." He turned to her, his eyes bright with amusement. "And when we spend it, in some exotic, faraway place, we'll toast dutiful, dependable Edward. I've always wanted to retire while I was still young. Psychiatry's a nice profession, I suppose—if it weren't for all those annoying patients."

They erupted into wonderful, liberating laughter, in a way she and Edward never had. She marveled at Harry's sense of humor, always teasing yet with just a grain of truth to it. Sometimes she felt she could love him for his intelligence alone.

"Expect an investigation," he said. "Strictly routine, nothing to worry about."

"What if the police link the two of us?"

"How can they, Cynthia? We've been careful, incredibly discreet. Even if we've been seen together, it's natural enough. You're the wife of my best friend."

"We made love right in the bedroom Edward and I share."

"It was just that once, last month, when he was away. He asked me to come down to keep you company, remember? For all appearances, my being in your home was perfectly innocent, should anyone have seen us."

She moistened her upper lip with the tip of her tongue. "I'll never forget that night. You were like a tiger, Harry. In the bed, on the floor—"

He laughed uproariously. "I believe I've still got carpet burns from all the thrashing about we did. And that was *before* you tore my clothes off like a madwoman!" His laughter died as her dark eyes dimmed and grew moist. "What is it, sweetheart?"

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"I wish we could go away right now, to some private island on the other side of the world."

"Soon enough, my love. For now, though, we shouldn't see each other again until it's all resolved."

"Resolved." She shivered, hugging herself and nestling against his furry chest. "Such a euphemistic word for what Edward's going to do. What if something goes awry. What if—?"

He lifted her chin, made her look at him. "I'm an accomplished psychiatrist, and Edward's oldest friend, who spends almost as much time with him as you do. I know Edward Strathmore like I know myself—and I've never known anyone as predictable."

She clutched him fiercely. "Do you love me, Harry?"

"What kind of question is that? Of course I do."

"There's no one else?"

"I haven't even looked at another woman in years, let alone touched one." He laughed, thinking back. "The names in my little black book—all from years ago, women whose faces I can't even remember anymore. I'd suggest you take the phone numbers and call them, if it would reassure you. Except that I tossed the damned book out, months ago."

"Of course you did." She shrugged, feeling foolish. "Forget I even asked."

His grin was wide now. "I've spent far more time with Edward in recent years than with anyone of the opposite sex." He glanced toward the mantelpiece and a framed photo of himself and Edward, their arms around each other's shoulders, the only photo on display in the house. "I imagine more than a few people are beginning to wonder just which gender I fancy, seeing me about with Edward so often."

She ran her fingers through the hair on his chest, her smile demure, her voice a purr. "Not me, Harry. I don't wonder, not for one moment."

He separated from her, suddenly serious. "Go back down to the house, darling. Be polite, but cool and distant. Begin packing a few things, so that he knows you're serious about leaving. Let it sink in and eat away at him. Trust me, his sense of failure and loss will become excruciating. For a man like Edward, suicide will be the next natural step. It's just a matter of time."

Five days later, Harry was hanging an Andy Warhol print above the long couch in the living room when the telephone rang. The print was one in a limited edition and had cost him more than he had a reasonable right to spend. But it was a spectacular Warhol, brilliant in its simplicity, a deadpan comment on the banality of contemporary life, and it delighted Harry each time he glanced at it. He made a final adjustment, aligning the frame, and grabbed the telephone

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on the third ring. It was Cynthia, calling from a pay phone.

"I thought we agreed, sweetheart. No more contact until it's finished."

"But he's behaving strangely, Harry."

"How so?"

"For the last few days, he's seemed so happy. He insisted we go out to lunch or dinner several times, something we haven't done since we were first married. We even went out to a movie instead of renting. He held hands with me as we walked down the street. He was never comfortable holding hands in public before. He kissed me, right in front of the Levinsons. I've never seen him like this, so at ease, almost blissful."

"It's not unexpected at all," Harry said.

"I don't understand."

"It's not uncommon for those who know the end is at hand to suddenly have a huge weight lifted from them. You often see it in the terminally ill, when they finally accept the finality of things. They stop resisting, and settle into a sense of serenity and calm—that blissfulness in Edward that you spoke of. One sometimes sees it in suicides, as well, when they've truly resolved to follow through with it. It's the blessed relief that finally comes with surrender."

"I should just go along, then? Stick with our plan?"

"Has he said anything about financial matters? A living trust?"

"He had me sign some papers, updating our affairs."

"You see? Didn't I tell you?"

"I know I'm worrying needlessly, Harry. But still—"

"Edward's at peace with his decision, Cynthia. Leave him alone as much as possible. Keep your distance emotionally. As I said before, it's just a matter of time."

"Are you going to feel guilty?" Her voice was tremulous. "About what we've done?"

His reply was staunch, unwavering—just what he felt she needed to hear at this crucial juncture. "I would, Cynthia, if Edward had a clue about enjoying life. But life, I'm afraid, has been wasted on Edward."

"I love you, Harry."

"I love you, too, darling. Now go about your routine as if nothing is amiss. And best not to call me again, not even from a pay phone. The next time we speak, Edward will be gone. It will be just the two of us, forever and ever."

Harry was enjoying a glass of award-winning Pinot Grigio with a nicely grilled salmon steak and sautéed shiitake mushrooms when the doorbell rang. The dusk was deep, so he flicked on the porch light. He opened the door to find two men in off-the-rack suits standing on his doorstep, looking awfully serious, even dour.

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"Harry Braxton?" the taller man asked.

"Yes, I'm Dr. Braxton."

The taller man showed Harry a detective's gold shield, then introduced himself and his partner. "We've just come from the Strathmore residence down the hill." The detective glanced behind him, even though the road up here was remote and no one was out. "Perhaps we could come in for a moment and speak more privately."

Cynthia must have sent them up in her place, Harry thought—too distraught over Edward's death, she'd no doubt convinced them, to deliver the news to Edward's best friend herself. A nice touch on Cynthia's part, if a bit unexpected.

"Of course," Harry said, laboring for the most appropriate words. "I hope—Is anything the matter? Is Edward—Are the Strathmores all right?"

When the door was shut and they'd crossed the entry, they stood facing each other in the living room.

"You and Mr. Strathmore are good friends?" the taller detective asked.

"Quite."

"For some time now?"

"Edward and I have been best friends since high school. What is it, Detective? You're beginning to alarm me."

"You moved up here, into this neighborhood, because of Mr. Strathmore?"

"You might say that. Edward tipped me to this house when the market was down and it was affordable. Told me the property values could only go up. So I purchased up here." Harry smiled for their benefit. "Edward was right, of course. Usually is."

"You're fond of Mr. Strathmore, then?"

"As I said, we're quite close."

"And you're happy living up here?"

"Yes, of course. What is this about?"

The taller detective glanced for a long moment at the photo of Harry and Edward on the mantelpiece. Then he turned abruptly, crossing to the picture window and looking out. "Up here where you can keep an eye on the Strathmores' house."

"I enjoy the view," Harry said.

"Yes, I'm sure you do. Do you ever see Mrs. Strathmore down there, Dr. Braxton?"

"I suppose, now and again. Never gave it much thought. What can I do for you, Detectives? Has something happened?"

The shorter detective glanced around the house, his eyes settling on the unfinished meal and glass of wine at one end of the dining room table. "You live alone, Dr. Braxton?"

"That's right."

"Never married?"

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"Came close once or twice, thought better of it."

"Not the marrying kind?"

"I wouldn't say that. It's just that—"

"That the right woman never came along?"

"I find these questions annoying, Detective. I really wish you'd explain yourself."

"Dating anyone now? Any special lady friend?"

Harry's face remained rigid while his mind raced, trying to sort things out, trying to stay a step or two ahead of them. Above all, he thought, they must not find out how he felt about Cynthia. "I'm devoted to my psychiatric practice. I haven't had much time for dating, to be quite frank. Not for years."

The taller detective stepped away from the window, joining them. "Good-looking guy like you, professional man, with a nice place like this. No one at all, Dr. Braxton?"

"I believe I answered your question," Harry said.

"You seem to find plenty of time to spend with Mr. Strathmore, though."

"We enjoy each other's company, as many male friends do."

"How about the wife?"

"Cynthia? What about her?"

The taller detective's eyes leveled on Harry's. "You close to Mrs. Strathmore as well?"

"Not really." Harry smirked, then worried that he might have overdone it. "Cynthia's all right, I suppose, if you like that kind of woman."

"What kind of woman would that be?"

"She's attractive, of course. I just happen not to find her very interesting."

"Put up with her for Mr. Strathmore's sake, do you?"

"That's awfully harsh." Harry shrugged. "But there's some truth to it, I suppose. We tolerate each other, Cynthia and I."

"Spend much time alone with her?"

"Never." Harry wished he hadn't blurted it out so forcefully. He smiled, trying to soften it. "Certainly not that comes to mind. Once or twice, possibly."

The shorter detective shoved his hands into his pants pockets, jingling change, and asked offhandedly, "Ever been in the Strathmores' bedroom, Dr. Braxton?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's a simple enough question. Have you ever spent time in their bedroom?"

"Certainly not."

"You'd remember if you had?"

"Absolutely." Harry stepped away and glanced out the window. Down at the house, emergency vehicles and lights could be seen

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out front. "Something's happened!" He turned back to the detectives. "For God's sake, tell me what's going on."

The shorter detective stepped forward, glancing down the hill. Then he raised his chin to look Harry directly in the eye. "Mrs. Strathmore's been murdered, Dr. Braxton."

"What?" Harry felt as if all the air had been sucked from him, while his legs turned wobbly and his face tingled and burned.

"You feel okay, Dr. Braxton?" The taller detective studied Harry closely, with the keen air of a laboratory scientist. "Perhaps you should sit down."

"I'm fine," Harry said, but his chin trembled. "You're sure—about Cynthia?"

The shorter detective glanced at his watch. "Mr. Strathmore returned home from the supermarket not quite an hour ago. As he was unloading groceries from his car, he heard a gunshot from inside the house. While someone escaped out the rear, Mr. Strathmore ran in to find his wife in the master bedroom. She'd been shot once and was dying."

"No." Harry backed up several steps until he reached a sofa, and sat down heavily. He stared at the floor a moment before looking up. "Not Cynthia. This can't have happened."

"Before she died," the shorter detective said, "she told her husband that you'd come to the house while he was gone. That you'd forced yourself in, intending violence."

Harry's eyes were wild. "That's not true!"

"She fled to the bedroom but you caught up with her. Chased her about the room, fell at least once to the floor as you grabbed for her. There was quite a commotion."

"That's preposterous, insane!"

"You shot her once in the chest, then ran out just before Mr. Strathmore came in. She managed to say enough to her husband before she died to clearly identify you as her killer."

"But why would I—?" Harry dropped his head, holding it in his hands. "Edward's making it up." He looked up, blinking back tears. "He killed her, don't you see? She was going to leave him."

"How would you know that?"

Harry froze, swallowing drily. Beneath his Italian silk shirt, he felt perspiration trickle from each armpit. The seconds ticked by like minutes. He had to say something, so he said, "Edward told me."

"Mr. Strathmore did."

Harry nodded, almost desperately. "Yes."

"That would differ from his account of things, Dr. Braxton."

Harry felt hot tears on his face, and heard his voice rise in pitch. "Don't you understand? They had a miserable life!"

"The neighbors tell another story. That they seemed quite affectionate with each other. The Levinsons saw them just the other

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day, kissing like newlyweds."

The taller detective sat down on the couch under the Warhol, facing Harry. "Why don't you tell us about your attraction to Mr. Strathmore, Dr. Braxton?"

"My *what?*"

"He told us about the feelings you've had for him since high school. How they interfered with your relationships with women. How you followed him here, even after he married. How you bought a house in the neighborhood to be close to him. A house that allowed you to see him every day, if only from a distance."

"But that's not true—not the way he's twisting it."

"He said he's tried to be kind, to remain friendly, while doing everything possible to discourage your deeper feelings. He feels you've become obsessed with him. He blames himself for letting things get so tragically out of control."

"This is absolutely crazy, what you're saying." Harry wiped away tears and sat up straight, raising his chin, fighting for control. "I won't hear another word of it."

The shorter detective jingled his coins again, then stopped. "You came to resent Mrs. Strathmore, didn't you, Dr. Braxton? To the point that you wanted her out of the picture."

"Absolutely not!"

"Can you account for your time, say for the past hour or so?"

"I've been here, cooking and eating a light dinner."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"It's only a ten-minute walk up the hill, isn't it? Less going down. At dusk, with a hooded jacket or sweater, you'd hardly be seen. Do you own such a piece of apparel, Dr. Braxton?"

"Of course I do! Who doesn't?"

On the couch, the taller detective leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "Do you also own a gun?"

Harry swallowed hard. "I loaned my gun to Edward."

"Ruger, nine-millimeter?"

"Yes, but—"

"Mr. Strathmore told us he hates guns," the shorter detective said. "Said they scare the heck out of him. He can't even bear to touch them."

Harry threw up his hands. "I'm telling you, he asked to borrow my gun!"

"His fingerprints would be on it, then."

Nausea rose in Harry like a fast tide. "Maybe not." His voice grew weak. "I gave it to him wrapped in a cloth."

"We found a nine-millimeter Ruger in the bedroom," the shorter detective went on, "near the body, along with a shell casing. You must have dropped the gun in your haste to flee."

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"Stop talking this way!"

"Why do I have the feeling that we'll find your fingerprints on that gun, but not Mr. Strathmore's?"

All at once, Harry understood exactly what was happening, the brilliance and perverse perfection of it. To his surprise, his nausea subsided and he began to relax. His voice became quiet, calm. "He probably wore gloves when he shot her, then got rid of them. Washed up, to get rid of any gunshot residue. Then picked up the phone and dialed nine-one-one."

The other detective nodded unconvincingly. "I suppose that's possible." His shrug was like an insult. "I suppose anything's possible."

"You're seeing this all wrong, both of you." Harry heard his voice as if he were someone else, listening in on the conversation. His protests sounded rote now, without conviction, as if all the steam had gone out of them.

"You said you'd never been in that bedroom," the other detective said. "You were very clear about that."

"Yes, that's what I told you." Harry chuckled grimly to himself. "Just as Edward knew I would."

"Then the forensics team won't find any trace evidence suggesting otherwise," the other cop said. "Hair, skin, threads, or other particles we can match to you or a piece of your clothing. Because they're going to go over every inch of that room, Dr. Braxton. They're going to check every item in this house for a match. If you've ever been in that bedroom, we're going to know."

Harry thought of the wild, wonderful hour or two he'd spent in that bedroom with Cynthia, of that memorable night when they'd made animal love. Just that once, when he'd come down to keep her company, at Edward's request.

"I'd like a glass of water," Harry said. "If you don't mind."

He started to rise, but the shorter detective pushed him gently back down. "I'll get it for you, Dr. Braxton."

"There's Perrier in the fridge, if it's not too much trouble."

"I think we can do that for you," the detective said.

When he was gone, the other detective said to Harry, "Tell me about your good friend, Mr. Strathmore. Tell me what it is that draws you so strongly to him."

Harry stared past the detective, at the new Warhol print, not really seeing it. A profound sense of calm had settled over him, something close to bliss.

"Edward's very orderly, very predictable." Harry sounded remote, as if his mind was in some exotic locale far, far away. A private island, perhaps, on the other side of the world. "Before he makes a decision, before he acts, Edward thinks everything through very carefully. Nothing out of place, nothing left to chance."

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"He's not the impulsive type, like you?"

"No." Harry smiled wanly. "Not the impulsive type, like me."

"We'll be going down to the station shortly, Dr. Braxton. We'll read you your rights. You'll want to get a lawyer."

"Yes, of course."

The shorter detective brought Harry a Waterford goblet of cold Perrier from the kitchen, handing it to him with a fleeting look of compassion.

"May I?" Harry said, indicating the picture window.

"Sure, why not?"

The two detectives watched Harry closely as he rose and crossed to the big window. It was dark out now, and the lights were on in Edward's house. He always kept them off as long as possible, well into dusk, to save on his electric bill. Harry could see him standing at the kitchen sink, getting water in a plastic cup, straight from the tap. For a moment, Edward looked up, directly at the window where Harry was standing, his eyes fixed and unblinking. At least it seemed that way to Harry. Then Edward lowered the shade, while Harry raised the crystal goblet to sip his sparkling water. ●

The Tale of the Purloined Tail
by Marie E. Truitt

My name is Charles Darwin, and I've called up to say,
Some perp stole my heirloom! Please, help me, I pray!
My mega-great grandfather, Simian by name,
Handed down this prized pendant . . . his real claim to fame;
And it's been in the family for eons galore.
It pains me to think it may be mine no more.
It's the crime of the ages . . . there's no doubt about it.
I'm certainly not a prime primate without it.
Without my appendage, I'm naked and bare,
And tend to lose balance when up in the air.
I've fashioned this theory I've dubbed "Evolution" . . .
A back-in-the-swing-of-things Tail-Restitution.
My theory is cosmic! So let me remind you . . .
While spinning in orbit, just peek out behind you;
When life's eighteen-carat . . . all hearty and hale . . .
It's because you have got this old world by the tail!
But now my tail's gone, and until it is found,
I can't test my theory and monkey around.
You need some more info? A bit of background?
My mind is chock-full . . . the details abound.
I once wrote a tribute extolling the tail.
Requests for the thing inundated my mail.
I call it "Lost Details" . . . I'd like you to read it.
(My poor purloined tail! Oh! How badly I need it!)

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LOST DETAILS

Tracing the gamut of civilization,
From tree house to penthouse the span of creation;
Viewing the aspects of life anatomical,
Heavenly bodies, no way astronomical;
One has to admit, and without hesitation,
Something unique has been lost in translation.
A ropelike appendage, a spine-dangling detail,
A twitchety, switchety he-tail or she-tail.
There's many and many a winning suggestion,
And here are a few for your wholesale ingestion.
Suppose you are tickling ivories with gusto,
And scratching your nose is a positive "musto";
Just think of the ease and finesse you could bring
To this clumsy routine if a tail you could swing.
Consider alarm clocks each cold winter morning
That rudely arouse you with fire-bell warning.
How sweet it would be to keep arms snuggled in
And extend spine-extension to stifle the din!
Or you who delight in a good book or two
And relish some buttery popcorn to chew,
No greasy old page, if a tail you can flip . . .
For there's many a drip 'twixt the nosh and the lip.
Oh! I could go on, but let's end this discussion
With soul-rending trumpet and throbbing percussion,
And voices raised high in a deep purple wail
Decrying the fates that begrudge us a tail!

So you see, it's important I get my tail back,
So I can get mankind back on the right track.
It's an endangered species . . . the last of its kind.
It's not just my loss . . . it's a loss for mankind.
A dastardly deed of humongous dimension . . .
A crème de la crime too awful to mention.
I long for my happy pre-theft status quo!
That just about wraps up my sad tale of woe.
Please tell all the world about Charlie D's plight!
And . . . if you should quote me . . . please spell my name right!!!

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

NAUGHTY

by Steve Hockensmith

If you think about it, Santa Claus is a little like Dirty Harry. He's a vigilante. He decides who's good and who's bad and he does something about it on his own terms. Well-behaved kids get toys. Brats get squat—or lumps of coal, though I think that got dropped in, like, the nineteen fifties.

When I was a little girl, I'd start worrying about whether I'd been good enough that year sometime around Thanksgiving, and for the next month I was a perfect little angel. It was scary to think I might not get any toys . . . but it was sort of reassuring, too. If Santa was really out there rewarding the nice and punishing the naughty, it meant things were fair. There was some kind of justice in the universe.

Well, that didn't last long. I mean, *you* try to get through elementary school believing life's fair. It can't be done. I stayed nice, though. Maybe it was just a habit by then.

I finally broke the habit this December. Life just pushed me too far, and I decided I was *done* being nice. Nice sucked. Santa wasn't watching—so what was the point?

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It was time to give naughty a try.

I graduated from IU in the spring, so this was supposed to be my first Christmas as a bona fide, official, independent adult. A year ago, I would've pictured myself flying home for the holidays from New York or Chicago or wherever it was I'd have my cool gig and my funky bachelorette pad. But when the holidays rolled around, I didn't have to fly back to Indiana—I was still there. I hadn't found a gig, cool or uncool, and my mom's apartment hardly counts as a "funky bachelorette pad," even if she is a bachelorette again thanks to *That Man.*

In every Christmas issue for the past several years Steve Hockensmith has added to the fun of the holidays with one of his howlingly funny take-offs on seasonal traditions. "So now that I've written about Santas, toy-fad frenzies, fruitcakes, and office gift-giving, you might think I'd run out of Christmas traditions to defile," he said in his submission letter to *EQMM.* "Nope! My newest story turns the innocent fun of caroling into something criminous."

"That Man" is what my mom calls my dad. He was spending Christmas in his new house in Atlanta with "That Woman," a.k.a. "That Girl," a.k.a. "That Blond Slut," a.k.a. "That Little Bitch." I actually got a Christmas card from That Man with a check for fifty bucks in it. Mom didn't get a card or a check, which was typical. That Man owed my mom a lot of checks, which is why she'd gone from living in a big house on Knob Hill to living in a dinky apartment building between an auto-parts store and a porn shop.

I was in that dinky apartment building with her because New York and Chicago aren't exactly clamoring for recently graduated liberal arts majors. In fact, *nobody's* clamoring for recently graduated liberal arts majors. When I was at IU, I thought I'd end up in publishing, communications, or journalism, but it didn't take long in "the real world" to figure out that my only prospects were in food service, retail sales, or prostitution. I told my mom once I'd pick that last option over the first two in a heartbeat, and she just gave me this sad look that said, "Oh, honey—all those years, all that money . . . for an *English* degree?"

Fortunately for us, one of our old neighbors, Dr. Roth, took mercy on Mom and gave her a part-time job as a receptionist. That covered the rent . . . just barely. So there was big-time pressure for me to "pull my own weight." I kept hoping to see an ad in the classifieds that suited me—you know, "Overeducated Smart-Ass Wanted to Talk About Books and Movies and Stuff." But of course *that* never happened.

So half a year after graduating from college, I gave up and took

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a job I knew I'd hate. I gave myself a built-in out, though: The job would only last one month. After four brutal, mind-numbing weeks wrapping Christmas presents at Fendler's department store, I'd escape minimum-wage hell and return to the relative bliss of unemployment.

I knew it would be bad, but I had no idea *how* bad. I'd been a wrapper over at J.C. Penney a few Christmases before, so I was prepared for the tedium. But it wasn't boredom that tortured me. It was embarrassment.

At least twice a day I saw someone I knew—a kid from my high school, somebody's mom or dad, a teacher, people like that. Sometimes I even had to wrap their presents, which was when things got *really* painful. The chitchat was always like, "Courtney gets back from San Francisco tomorrow. You know she moved there after finishing up at Princeton, don't you? She's an assistant editor at Chronicle Books, and she just *loves* it. So . . . umm . . . what have you been doing? Oh, and could you wrap the bathrobe and the slippers in the same box?"

Did I mention that I was Dreiser High School's valedictorian?

In the afternoon, another wrapper came in to help me—a chatty old woman named Mavis who hijacked every conversation within earshot with anecdotes about her son's adopted Guatemalan children. I had to hear about how little Tomás wet his pants on a mall Santa's knee about a thousand times a day. But that was fine as long as it switched the topic away from *me.*

Before Mavis came in, though, there was no buffer—I was all alone at my little "gift-wrap station" near the jewelry department. So of course that's when *he* came up.

He was good-looking, in a mature, TV-anchorman kind of way—tall, full-bodied but not fat, with a jutting jaw and perfect white teeth and thick hair that was just starting to go gray around the edges. He was a slick dresser, too, wearing a fleece-lined suede jacket over a black turtleneck and snug black jeans. My mom would've thought he was a complete hottie.

It wasn't his looks that caught my attention, though. It was how familiar he seemed. And the way *he* was looking at *me.*

"Hi," he said in that creepy, "Hel-lo, beautiful" voice some men use when they think they're being suave.

"Hi," I said. It was the same word he'd used, but it sounded a lot different coming from me. His "hi" had been two syllables, two notes: *hiii-eee.* Mine was like the sound a dictionary makes when you drop it on a desk: *thud.* I gazed at him with the blank, unseeing eyes of a dead-souled retail zombie.

He either didn't get the message or took it as a challenge.

"Looks like you could use some excitement," he said with a sly smile as he swung a Fendler's bag up onto the counter in front of

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me. "I guess I arrived just in the nick of time."

"Uh-huh. Receipt, please."

That's the drill—no receipt, no gift-wrap. Fendler's makes you drop at least fifty bucks on merchandise before they'll favor you with twenty-eight cents' worth of "complimentary" wrapping paper. Otherwise it costs four bucks a box.

"It's in the bag," the guy said, still smiling.

I pulled out the slip of paper and gave it a quick glance to make sure Don Juan had spent enough money. That quick glance immediately turned into a pop-eyed stare.

Mr. Middle-aged Smoothie had obviously been waiting for just that reaction.

"My credit card's still smoking," he joked.

The guy had blown *three thousand dollars* in the store that morning. And everything he'd bought fit into one not-particularly-large paper bag.

"It's all for the ball and chain," he said. "I have a lot to make up for." His grin grew wider, and he waggled his bushy eyebrows at me. "I've been a naaaaauuuughty boy this year."

"Yeah, well, I guess so," I mumbled, unsure what kind of response he was looking for. I mean, I know a thing or two about come-ons—I've been fending them off since I put on my first training bra. But this was one of the weirdest ones yet . . . if it even *was* a come-on.

His smirky leer answered my question.

"How about you?" he asked. "Have *you* been naughty this year?"

It was a tossup for a second there: Should I slap his handsome face or spit in his twinkling eye? But then I remembered that I actually needed this stinking job, and I smiled instead. Not a friendly smile, mind you. A tight, prim, "I'll just ignore that remark" smile.

"It's going to take a few minutes to wrap your gifts," I said.

"Fine. Can I watch?"

I fought back a shiver. I was beginning to wonder if this guy was capable of saying *anything* that didn't sound like a creepy innuendo. Maybe it was a rare medical condition and he just couldn't help himself, like Tourette's but sexual. Perv Syndrome.

"Suit yourself," I said, working hard to keep my voice neutral. I began emptying out his bag. It didn't take long. There were only four items in it: a pearl necklace, a diamond-studded ring, a wrist watch coated with even more diamonds, and a long fur coat that must have wiped out an entire family of minks, including nieces, nephews, and cousins twice removed. It made me nervous, having three thousand bucks' worth of merchandise spread out on my worktable, and normally I would've taken extra special care wrapping it up. But Casanova gave me a good reason to work fast.

"We're neighbors, you know," he said. "I've seen you."

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Ew, I thought.

"Oh?" I said.

Cut-cut-fold-tape-fold-tape-tape. I finished the necklace and moved on to the watch. If gift-wrapping were an Olympic sport, I'd have been on my way to the gold.

"Yeah. You live on Knob Hill, right? I'm right around the corner on Knopfler Drive."

Well, that was a relief, at least. He was talking about the old neighborhood, the nice one, the one we'd had to leave after That Man ran off with That Woman. Which meant he didn't know where I lived now. That dialed the Yuck Factor from a ten down to a seven.

"Oh, sure," I said, not looking up from the watch. I was cutting and taping so fast I could've lopped off a finger and wrapped it up with the guy's gifts before I noticed the first drop of blood. "I thought you looked familiar."

"I can remember seeing you riding your bike, washing cars in the driveway. You even came to my house once or twice when you were out caroling with people from the neighborhood."

"Oh, really?"

"Really," the man said. My back was to him, but somehow I could sense that he was leaning in closer when he spoke next. "You've changed."

Oh God. Yuck Factor: *Eight.*

I knew what he was going to say next before the words even left his nasty lips.

"You were a girl then—"

"And I'm a woman now?"

"Exactly."

Nine.

"You know, my wife's out of town until tomorrow afternoon. I'm going to be all alone tonight."

Here it came.

"Maybe you could drop by for some . . . eggnog . . . or something."

Ding-ding-ding! *Ten.*

I don't know how I could work so fast when I was practically choking on bile, but somehow I did it. The creep's presents were wrapped and back in his shopping bag. I turned and shoved the bag at him.

"ThereyougohaveaniceChristmasgoodbye," I said, speaking so fast the words blurred together into some totally new language.

He understood me, though. He reached up slowly to take the bag, flashing me a lazy, unoffended smile. I saw now exactly what he was: the kind of guy who hits on everything with breasts simply as a way of playing the odds. You know the type. If he's shot down ninety-nine times a day, well, that's fine by him. His feelings aren't hurt—because number one hundred makes it all worthwhile.

"Thanks," he said. "Merry Christmas."

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Even those innocent words came out icky and lewd somehow. I almost expected the guy to leave a glistening slime trail behind him as he walked away.

And, in a way, he did. Not on the store's floor. In my head.

I couldn't stop thinking about Viagra Man's offer. Not the way he wanted me to think about it—I wasn't tempted. Bleah.

No, I was *mad.*

What had he meant when he said he had "a lot to make up for"? Or that he'd been "a naaaaauuuughty boy" this year? He'd been cheating on his wife? He'd been caught? And now he was going to buy his way back into the poor woman's heart with some expensive baubles . . . while still chasing tail on the side?

He was a scumbag. A sleaze. A gonad-brained son of a bitch.

And he was going to get away with it. I just *knew* it.

He deserved more than a lump of coal in his stocking. He deserved a loogie in his eggnog—or, better yet, a good, hard kick in the ass.

But there was no Santa Claus to leave the coal or hock the loogie or put a boot up the guy's butt. The universe didn't care about good or bad. Naughty Boy would go unpunished.

Unless . . . if only . . .

Wouldn't it be great if someone pulled a Grinch on the guy? You know, stole his Christmas? It would be like the whole Robin Hood thing, only more festive and seasonal. Rob gifts from the rich, give gifts to the poor. Or, if you happen to be poor yourself . . . well, why not cut out the middleman and just keep the booty? I mean, what's the difference? Poor is poor, right? It would be the next best thing to a victimless crime, because the only "victim" would be a selfish turd who really, really deserved it.

I spent the rest of my shift obsessing about Naughty Boy. In a weird way, it turned out to be the best day I ever had as a Fendler's Gift-Wrap Service Specialist. Paper cuts, pushy customers, the one-hundredth repetition of the Tomás wee-wee story, the one-thousandth repetition of "Have a Holly Jolly Christmas" from the loudspeakers directly above my head—I didn't notice any of it. I was too busy daydreaming, picturing myself as a sort of jingle-bell Batman doling out harsh yuletide justice.

And at some point, I realized I wasn't just daydreaming. I was *considering*—seriously thinking about tracking the guy down and giving him a good Scrooging.

Now, like I said before, I'm nice. This was, like, an actual robbery I was thinking about—a *heist.* What would someone like me know about something like that? The last time I'd stolen anything had been when I was five years old and I grabbed a 3 Musketeers bar off the candy rack at the Kroger. My mom saw it when we got outside and made me take it back and give it to the manager. I cried

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for an hour. I'm not exactly a hardened criminal. I don't even *know* any hardened criminals.

But I realized that I do know a guy who's kind of a softened criminal. When my shift was over, I went looking for him.

I'd met Arlo Hettle the year before when I was suffering through my Christmas break trapped in a job so crappy it actually made my gig at Fendler's look pretty cushy. Wrapping other people's presents all day isn't any fun, but it's like a week in the Bahamas compared to elfing.

Yeah, that's right, *elfing*—Arlo and I were mall elves together. We worked in "Santa's Workshop" over at Olde Towne Mall. I'd lead a little rugrat up to Santa's lap, Santa would *ho ho ho,* the kid would start bawling, Arlo'd take a picture, I'd whisk the kid away, and then we'd start the whole hellish cycle all over again. It was like being that Greek guy Sisyphus except with screaming toddlers instead of a boulder and a hill. To make it even worse, Santa wanted me to call him "Big Bob," and he seemed to have a fetish for girls wearing green tights, curly-toed shoes, and red-felt hats. Ugh. *Please* don't make me tell *that* story again.

Anyway, I had a feeling Arlo would be back at Olde Towne again this Christmas. The guy's not exactly a go-getter. The only thing he goes and gets is pot—lots and lots of it. He's so mellow, half the time it's hard to tell whether he's even awake. He wouldn't be all that dependable as an accomplice, but I figured he'd know more than me about breaking the law, since he does it about a dozen times a day. If I was looking for a bad influence, Arlo was the logical place to start.

I was right about where to find him. Olde Towne's Santa was new and his she-elf was new, but the he-elf was still Arlo Hettle. And it was obvious he hadn't given up his favorite pastime—he was shuffling around like an old man in slippers, his mouth hanging open and his eyelids drooping low over glassy, red-streaked eyes. He was like a "Just Say No" poster come to life.

His lips slowly curled into a dreamy, vacuous smile when he saw me, and not long after that he put up the "FEEDING THE REINDEER" sign we used whenever Santa needed to go sit on a *different* throne. I met up with him by the unmarked door that led to the employee break room, and he greeted me with the same words he'd spoken to me most often the year before.

"Hey, Hannah. Wanna go get baked?"

"Gee, Arlo, it's nice to see you, too."

The first thing stoners lose after their short-term memory is the ability to recognize sarcasm, so Arlo just gave me a dopey grin.

"Yeah," he said. "So, really . . . you wanna get stoned? I've got some grrrrreat weed in my car."

This was my criminal mastermind? I almost abandoned the whole stupid scheme right then and there. But I could still feel the

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hot, angry fire of righteous indignation burning in the pit of my stomach, and I forged ahead.

"All right, let's go," I said. "I've got something private I want to talk to you about anyway."

Climbing inside Arlo's Datsun was like rolling myself up in a giant doobie. I cracked a window, letting in a steady swirl of fresh, cold winter air, but I didn't think it would do much good. So much pot had been smoked inside that car you could get a contact high just from checking the oil. Arlo lit up and offered me a hit, and I shook my head. He responded with a bleary "Cool—more for me" grin.

I talked while Arlo toked. I told him about Naughty Boy—the sleazy come-on, the expensive gifts, the out-of-town wife. I told him I knew where the guy lived, sorta kinda. And I told him my plan: Arlo distracts Naughty Boy at the front door while I slip in the back, find the Christmas tree, and *yoink*—nab the presents.

"Distract him how?" Arlo asked in-between puffs.

"I don't know. Maybe you could pretend your car broke down or something. I think he'd believe you."

Arlo's Datsun is the Frankenstein's monster of the automotive world—it looks like it was sewed together from the dead parts of six other cars.

"Why couldn't *you* distract him?" Arlo wriggled his eyebrows suggestively. "Sounds like he'd like that a lot better."

"He knows where I work, Arlo. He could track me down. It has to be someone he's never seen before," I explained patiently. "Plus, I'm the one who wrapped the presents—I know what the boxes look like. We wouldn't want to go to all this trouble just to steal the wrong gifts, right?"

"Oh. Yeah. Right. So what do we do with the stuff once we have it?" Arlo coughed out a smoky chuckle. "Like, I don't think I'd look good in a fur coat."

"We sell everything, Arlo. To, you know, a whatever. A guy who handles stolen merchandise. A . . . a . . ." My mind went blank. It must've been the fumes.

"I know what you mean. A fender," Arlo said helpfully. "No. A fern."

"A *fence,*" I said. "Do you know one?"

"Me? Why would I know somebody like that? I'm, like, a normal, law-abiding citizen."

Since this was being said by a joint-sucking dude in an elf suit, I had my doubts.

"Come on," I said. "You deal with shady types all the time. I mean, you don't buy your pot from the Salvation Army, right? You must know somebody who could help us sell the stuff on the sly."

Arlo furrowed his brow and frowned. He was trying to think. Obviously it was hard work. After a long, quiet moment, he nodded slowly.

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"You're right. There's a guy who could tell me what to do."

"Good. So what do you think? Should we do it?"

I know, I know. That was a cop-out question. I was going to make poor, dope-addled Arlo make the call—because I was afraid to. I mean, daydreaming about a crime is one thing. But actually trying to pull it off . . . well, that's something else. A part of me was already backing out.

I'd been serious about striking back at Naughty Boy and all the other naughty boys of the world. But I couldn't do it alone, could I? If Arlo said no, then I wouldn't have to feel like *I* was the one who didn't have the nerve.

In other words, I was counting on *Arlo* to bring me to my senses.

Pretty dumb, huh?

"Sure," Arlo said. "Let's go for it."

The fifteen minutes he had for his doobie break were almost up, so we rushed through our planning—where to meet, what to bring—and said goodbye. In two and a half hours we'd see each other again . . . and my days as a nice girl would be over. By the end of the night, I'd be a thief. A crook. A skank.

I hadn't even done anything yet, and already I felt guilty. Back home at the apartment, my dinner went down untasted—which wasn't a big change of pace, really, since dinners at home never have much taste to begin with. Our finances being what they are, Mom and I have to rely on recipes in which the primary ingredients are canned tuna, macaroni, and either mayonnaise or Velveeta processed cheese product. If we want to add a little zip, we garnish our tuna casserole *du jour* with ketchup from the little packets Mom stuffs into her purse every time she's in McDonald's.

This particular night, we were feasting on something called "tuna noodle strudel." It wasn't as bad as it sounds—it was worse. Tuna and cinnamon don't belong on the same shelf, let alone in the same *recipe.* Still, I managed to choke it down. My taste buds were probably screaming in agony, but I was too distracted to hear them.

Mom noticed how far away I was . . . and totally misinterpreted what it meant. She's pretty touchy about a lot of stuff these days—the apartment, clothes, my car, her car, electricity. Anything to do with money. Including food.

"You don't like it?" she asked, nodding at the still-steaming pan of mushy brown tuna goo on the table between us.

"No, it's fine."

I didn't have the energy to give it much oomph, and the words came out sounding flat and tired, like a lie you can't stand to tell even one more time. Which is exactly what it was.

Mom got a hurt look on her face.

"You're not acting like it's fine," she said.

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"It's just that . . . today I . . ."

I almost told her the real reason I seemed so out of it—what I was thinking about doing. But I knew she'd totally flip out, so I switched gears at the last second. Not that I lied or anything. I was still honest. *Too* honest.

"I'm sick of tuna," I said. "Every day it's, like, tuna pie or tuna stroganoff or tuna surprise. You know, the only *surprise* around here would be a meal without tuna."

Mom's expression changed from hurt to angry and back again.

"You know I have to look for bargains these days, Hannah. And that tuna was thirty-three cents a can at Sam's Club."

"I know. But did you have to buy *four cases?* I feel like I'm growing gills."

"I try to make it interesting . . . ."

"Mom, 'tuna noodle strudel' isn't interesting—it's demented!"

That did it.

"If you want lobster and steak every night, you just get That Man on the phone and tell him you're coming to Atlanta!" Mom yelled. Then she buried her face in her hands and started to cry.

I'd pushed the button—the one that automatically drags That Man into the conversation. It's pretty easy to push. I could say we were out of milk and it would be That Man's fault. I could say the john had stopped working and I'd hear how That Man had flushed Mom down the toilet. I could say my car needed new brakes, and she'd say if there was any justice That Man would get run over by a truck.

That Man That Man *That Man!*

I walked over to Mom and put my arms around her and said stuff like "I didn't mean it" and "I don't want to go to Atlanta" and "I *like* tuna surprise." But I was thinking something else entirely: "Damn it, woman—get over it! You're letting a cheesy, cheating bastard ruin your whole life! He's not worth it! Let it go!"

And then that English degree of mine finally paid for itself. If there's one thing they teach you to recognize in college-level lit classes, it's irony. And right here in front of me I had enough to fill two Edith Wharton novels with enough left over for a John Updike short story.

Who was about to let a cheesy, cheating bastard ruin her life? Like mother, like daughter. It was so Freudian it was spooky.

By the time my mother was through crying, my mind was made up.

When I left the apartment that night, I told Mom I'd just be gone a few minutes—I'd left my copy of *Mystic River* at Fendler's. It was a library book, so if it got lost we'd have to pay a twenty-buck fine. That made it an urgent enough errand to suit Mom, who can get antsy about me "burning perfectly good gas" when I

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drive eight blocks for a late-night Ben & Jerry's run. Maybe she felt guilty about her little meltdown at dinner, because she just told me to hurry back—*It's a Wonderful Life* was on, and she was going to make popcorn.

I expected to be home before the last kernel popped. I was just going to whip over to the old neighborhood, meet Arlo, tell him the whole stupid, crazy robbery thing was off, then drive home with a clean conscience for a wholesome, all-American evening with my mother.

If only.

Arlo's Datsun was already at our designated meeting place—the corner of Knopfler and Knob Hill—when I showed up. It surprised me that he'd actually managed to make it on time.

I got an even bigger surprise once I parked and walked up to his car. The windows were steamed up, but I could see dark shapes moving behind the foggy glass.

Arlo wasn't alone. There were two other people in the car with him. I stopped a few yards short of the Datsun's rear bumper, unsure what to do. By the time the big neon LEAVE NOW sign was flashing in my head, it was too late—someone was getting out of the car and walking toward me.

It wasn't Arlo. For a second, I wasn't even sure it was a human being. The guy was huge—like *Bigfoot* huge. I couldn't even believe he'd been inside the Datsun. He looked like he wouldn't fit in anything smaller than a tank.

He might not have been quite so scary if he'd been wearing something in the Christmas spirit, like maybe a fuzzy red sweater with a cartoon reindeer on it. But no—he was in burnout clothes. You know what I mean. Army surplus jacket, cammo pants, combat boots. I couldn't see what was under the jacket, but I was pretty sure it had to be a Megadeath T-shirt.

He said exactly what you don't want someone like him to say under circumstances like these.

"Get in the car."

I took a step backward, not forward.

"Who are you?"

"A friend of Arlo's," he said. For a "friend" he sure didn't sound very friendly. "Get in quick before someone sees us."

"I don't think so."

He moved closer. I took another step back.

The houses on Knob Hill and Knopfler Drive are what you'd call "palatial"—they're big, they're tucked away behind lots of trees, and they have long, looping driveways from the road. So nobody was particularly close-by. But I've got pretty strong lungs, and I was about to put them to work. I figured a good long scream would get *somebody's* attention.

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Sasquatch read my mind. His right hand slipped into his jacket pocket and something inside bulged out against the heavy green cloth.

"Make a sound and I'll blow your head off," he said.

I froze, partially out of fear, partially out of indecision. I mean, how did I know the guy really had a gun? On the other hand, how badly did I want to find out?

A *squeak-squeak-squeak* came from the car. Someone was rolling down a window.

Arlo's curly-haired head popped into view.

"Get in the car, Hannah. *Please,"* he said. "It'll be all right. Really."

I didn't know about the "It'll be all right" part, but the *"Please"* sounded pretty sincere—and pretty scared.

I got in the car. Arlo was in front with another guy, so that put me in the back with Paul Bunyan.

The man sitting next to Arlo stubbed a cigarette out in the ashtray before swiveling around to face me. His toothy yellow grin practically glowed in the dark. He was older than the rest of us, though I couldn't tell how much older. He didn't have wrinkles or gray hair or anything like that, but his skin seemed leathery, like he'd been stitched together from old wallets.

"Hey, Hannah," he said. "Sorry to scare ya, babe. I know you weren't expecting to see us. But don't worry—we're here to help."

He kept beaming his big grin in my face like it was going to hypnotize me. It reminded me of the python that tries to eat Mowgli in *The Jungle Book.* You know—"Trust in meeeeee. Just in meeeeee. . . ."

"Arlo, who are these guys?"

"Diesel and the Reptile," he said limply, without turning around to face me.

"'Diesel and the Reptile'?"

I wasn't sure I'd heard him right. It sounded like the name of a bad punk band.

The older guy jumped in to explain.

"My man Arlo came to us tonight and told us what you're planning. He was looking for some help on the back end—you know, moving the merchandise. But we thought maybe it would be better if someone with some experience stepped in to help. Just to make sure everything goes smoothly."

He said it all in this calm, ultra-reasonable tone, like, "Yeah, we're gonna screw ya over, but hey . . . try to look at it from our perspective."

"Let me guess," I said to the guy. "You're the Reptile."

He nodded. "That's what they call me, babe," he said cheerfully.

"Well, I'm sorry, Mr. Reptile, but I was coming over here to tell

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Arlo it's off. I can't do it."

"Sure you can," the Reptile said.

"No, I can't."

"Yes, you can."

"I don't want to."

"I don't care."

The Reptile's grin was gone now.

"Let me explain it to you," he said. "You know what the rich guy looks like. You know what the boxes look like. Without you, we can't make the grab. And if we can't make the grab, then you're taking money right out of the Reptile's pocket."

"Look, it's nothing personal, I just—"

"I'd take it personal," the Reptile cut in. He nodded at the burnout. "Diesel would take it personal. Wouldn't you, D?"

I'd been doing my best to ignore the man-mountain next to me, but I glanced his way now.

"Very personal," he said. That whatever in his jacket pocket was still pointing at my heart.

I decided on a different approach.

"Okay," I said. "I'll try. But Arlo should've told you—I don't know where the guy lives. All I know is he's somewhere around the corner on Knopfler. I'm gonna have to sneak around peeking in windows until I see him."

Or sneak around pretending to peek in windows until I can slip into the shadows, circle back, get in my car, and get the hell out of there.

" 'Sneak around peeking in windows'? Oh, babe." The Reptile shook his head and chuckled paternally. His impossibly wide grin returned again, giving me another look at his nicotine-stained teeth. "You are *so* lucky we're here. The Reptile has a plan." He picked something up off the front seat and tossed it to me.

It was a powder-blue ski mask decorated with the white silhouettes of snowflakes, sleds, and snowmen. The Reptile handed identical masks to Arlo and Diesel before pulling the last one over his head. His face disappeared under the pale blue fabric, leaving nothing but his dark eyes and toothy smile. He was like the Cheshire Cat—if the Cheshire Cat smoked Marlboros and robbed gas stations.

"Umm . . . so 'the plan' is we sneak around peeking in windows . . . with masks on?" Arlo asked. He sounded pretty depressed. I assumed guilt was eating him up inside—and I wished his guilt *bon appétit*. He deserved to feel guilty as hell for getting me into this mess.

"Nooooo," the Reptile said, still flashing his cocky grin. "The plan is we go up to every house on that street and just ring the doorbell. Sooner or later, we'll find our guy."

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"Uh-huh," I said. I was starting to worry that my dumb little scheme hadn't just been hijacked by criminals—it had been hijacked by *insane* criminals. "And that's not going to make anybody a little, you know . . . suspicious?"

"Not at all. Because we're gonna have a perfect cover. Tell me, babe—can you sing?"

I nodded, thinking my fears had just been confirmed: The Reptile was off his meds. But then he explained his grand master plan, and I realized that he wasn't outright crazy after all—he was just slightly deluded and really, really dumb.

On the way over, they'd made two stops. One was at a Wal-Mart to buy the ski masks. The other was at a 7-Eleven to swipe the plastic donation jar next to the cash register. A flier was taped to the jar. "GIVE THE GIFT OF BREATH," it said. Next to the words was a picture of a middle-aged woman coughing into a clenched fist.

We were about to go caroling door-to-door on behalf of the American Emphysema Association.

"Caroling . . . in ski masks?" I said to the Reptile.

"Hey, it's cold out," he replied, sounding genuinely disappointed that I didn't share his enthusiasm for the plan. He pointed to the mask covering his face. "And they make us look kinda jolly, y'know? Harmless. Like clowns or something."

"Well, yeah, I can't argue with the clown part," I almost said. I caught myself just in time.

"Look, Reptile," I said instead, "I grew up in this neighborhood, and let me tell you something—rich people are *paranoid.* Nothing ever happens out here, but half the people on the block have nine-one-one on speed-dial. They've got security cameras, guard dogs. Some of them have guns, Reptile. I mean, I'm talking NRA bumper stickers on the BMW—people who think they're being followed by black helicopters. Four strangers knocking on doors in ski masks is a bad idea."

I wasn't lying, exactly. I was just really, really exaggerating. I was talking about one person, the neighborhood's official wacko—Mr. Macnee. He was the kind of guy who put up "NO TRESPASSING" signs on Halloween and took potshots at deer from his back porch. His reputation as a lunatic extended for miles around, and kids used to ride their bikes in from other neighborhoods just to ring-and-run him. Sometimes it was worth their time, too: He'd been known to come charging out of the house in his Tighty Whities waving a pistol over his head.

But it didn't matter that there was some truth in what I was saying. The Reptile just shook his head and smiled like I was a fifth-grader telling a dog-ate-my-homework story to the teacher.

"We're doing this together, babe. Get used to it. And if you get

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any ideas about yelling for help, just remember that this was all *your* idea—and that's what we'll tell the cops if we're caught."

"And remember me," Diesel added. "Cuz I'm gonna be right next to you the whole time."

I nodded. I'd remember. Diesel wasn't the kind of person who just slips your mind.

We got out of the Datsun and began trudging through the slush along Knob Hill toward Knopfler Drive. It was cold, and above us a haze of tiny snowflakes was drifting over a full moon. It was perfectly wintry, perfectly Christmasy, and I was perfectly miserable. As we marched along, we passed Twenty-seven Knob Hill—the house where I grew up. I was afraid to look at it. The sight of it would probably bring tears to my eyes, and I already had plenty to cry about that night.

I couldn't block all the memories, though. I thought back to the night just five or six Christmases before when Mom and Dad asked me if I wanted to go out caroling again that year. I was at the height of my high-school snottiness at the time, and wandering around the neighborhood with my parents singing "Here We Come A-Wassailing" seemed like the absolute uncoolest thing I could possibly do. I told them I wouldn't go caroling if my life depended on it.

I guess I was wrong about that. Diesel was walking behind Arlo and me with one hand buried in his jacket pocket—maybe even one finger curled around a trigger. So I wasn't worried about being uncool anymore. I was worried about being dead.

I told the Reptile we should skip the first house on Knopfler, and when I explained why he actually listened. I knew who lived there—Mrs. Knapp and her kids. There used to be a *Mr.* Knapp, but she kicked him out in, like, 1996. I guess she found a better lawyer than my mom did, because Mrs. Knapp stayed in the house with her daughters and Mr. Knapp we never saw again.

Next-door was a huge, white, *Gone With the Wind*-looking place. There were a lot of big houses in the neighborhood, but this was one of the few you'd have to come right out and call a mansion.

The lights were on. Someone was home.

"Okay, let's do it," the Reptile said.

"I'm telling you—they're gonna call the cops the second they see us," I said.

"You'd better hope not," the Reptile replied. "Move."

Something hard jabbed me in the back. Diesel was prodding me with the could-be-a-gun in his jacket pocket. I moved.

As we walked up the long driveway toward the house, I tried to picture how this scenario was going to play itself out—and suddenly realized that we'd overlooked a key element of our disguise.

"What are we going to sing?"

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"It doesn't matter," the Reptile said. " 'Frosty the Snowman.' "

" 'Frosty the Snowman'? Real carolers wouldn't sing that," I pointed out.

"Why not?"

"It's secular."

There was something about the silence that followed that told me the Reptile wasn't just mulling over what I'd said. He didn't understand it.

" 'Frosty the Snowman,' " I explained, "is not a song about Jesus."

"Why does it have to be about Jesus?" Arlo asked.

"I don't know. It just does. Carolers sing old stuff. Traditional songs. With religion in 'em. Not 'Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,' not 'Jingle Bell Rock'—and definitely not 'Frosty the Snowman.' "

"Oh, who cares?" the Reptile said.

"I care," I shot back. "We've got to convince these people or I *swear* they're gonna call the cops."

"She's right."

I looked over my shoulder, shocked to hear Diesel's low rumble of a voice.

"Hell, man," he said, " 'Frosty the Snowman' ain't even about *Christmas.*"

"Okay, okay," the Reptile said, his voice starting to lose its oozy calm. We were getting close to the house now, and he was obviously anxious to settle on something fast. "If not 'Frosty the Snowman,' then what?"

" 'Here Comes Santa Claus'?" Arlo suggested.

"What's religious about that?" Diesel wanted to know.

"Isn't Santa, like, a saint or something?"

"I don't know," Diesel replied, sounding unconvinced. "Santa Claus seems pretty sexular to me."

Even if I'd wanted to correct him, I wouldn't have been able to. The Reptile spat out a curse before the debate could go any further.

"We're gonna sing 'We Three Kings,' okay? That's got baby Jesus and the three wise guys and all that Christmasy crap. So get ready. If our man answers the door, you give the signal—" He pointed a glove-covered finger at me. "—and Diesel'll just pop him in the face. Then we're in. Right?"

"Right," Diesel said.

"Right," Arlo mumbled, obviously wishing he was curled up somewhere cozy cuddling a warm bong.

I didn't say anything. I was too freaked.

Pop him in the face? What did that mean? "Pop" as in "punch"? Or "pop" as in "pull out a gun and kill the poor bastard"?

As we stepped up onto the veranda and the Reptile rang the doorbell, I went from freaked to super-freaked. I was thinking

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about something else the Reptile had said. I was supposed to "give the signal" for Diesel to start popping. But what signal? We hadn't discussed any signal. What if I blinked or sneezed or scratched my nose and Diesel thought "It's go time" and some innocent old man ended up taking a special holiday trip to the morgue?

And then I went from super-freaked to super-super-*super*-freaked, because when the door opened, I found myself face-to-face with our prey. Naughty Boy had answered the door.

He had a snifter of amber liquid in his hand—it must've been cognac or brandy or one of those other nasty things "mature" guys drink to prove they're sophisticated and worldly. When he saw our little ski-masked gang on his front porch, he smiled his smarmy smile and took a quick sip.

"What is this—a stickup?" he joked.

The Reptile, Diesel, even Arlo—they all turned to me. If I so much as shivered the wrong way, the man standing before us might be killed. He was a vile, disgusting, lying scum blossom, yeah, but he deserved a pie in the face, not a bullet through the brain.

We stood there, all five of us frozen in place, for an agonizingly long moment. I refused to move, afraid anything I did would be interpreted as "Let him have it!" From the corner of my eye, I could see the Reptile's gaze moving from me to Naughty Boy, me to Naughty Boy, as he tried to gauge my reaction.

"Hey, guys," our victim said. "It's freezing out here. What do you want?"

He started to swing the door closed—not to shut it all the way, maybe. Probably just to cut off some of the frigid air flowing into his house. But the Reptile couldn't take any chances. He looked at Diesel.

Diesel took a step forward.

"Weeeeee three kings of O-rie-ent arrrrrrre," I blurted out.

Diesel stopped.

"Bear-ring gifts, we tra-verse a-farrrrrr," I continued. I locked eyes with Arlo and did my best to plead through my mask.

Sing, you zonked-out jackass. Sing!

"Fieeeeld and founnn-tain, mooooorrr and mou-oun-tain," Arlo crooned, making my solo an off-key duet.

"Foll-o-wing yon-der star." Diesel belted it out. Amazingly, he had a beautiful baritone voice and he sang with the passion of an opera diva.

The Reptile joined in for the "Ohhh-ohhh star of wonder, star of night" part. He had the worst voice of all of us by far. It was the hoarse, strangled gurgle of a three-pack-a-day smoker. He really did sound like a reptile—an iguana trying to do a Bing Crosby imitation. It threw the whole chorus off, and by the time we were

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into the second verse it was obvious none of us knew the lyrics. We were trying to fake it by garbling the words and throwing in some wheezy *ooo-ooos* and *mmm-mmms*, and finally the whole thing came crashing to a halt when I sucked in a particularly deep breath of frigid air that flash-froze my vocal cords. My singing exploded into hacking coughs, and Arlo began thumping me on the back, saying, "You all right?"

"Wait right there," Naughty Boy said, and he turned and disappeared into the house, closing the door behind him.

"Oh, crap, man. Hannah was right," Arlo said. "He's calling the cops."

The Reptile stepped around him to get in my face. "That's not the guy?"

"No . . . I've never . . . seen him before," I managed to lie in-between coughs.

"Middle-aged man alone in the house near the corner of Knob Hill and Knopfler . . . and it's not him?"

"That's right," I said, my voice slowly starting to gain strength again. "For all we know he's off rounding up the wife and kids so they can hear us."

"No, man, I'm tellin' ya—he's calling the cops," Arlo said, panic beginning to cut through the hempish haze that usually hangs around him.

The Reptile leaned in so close to me our polyester-covered noses almost bumped, and I could smell his stale, smoky breath even through my mask.

"If you're lying . . ." he said.

The door opened again, and the Reptile turned around. Naughty Boy was coming out of the house straight toward him. The Reptile took a step back, bumping into me.

Naughty Boy reached out toward him. There was something clenched in his fist.

"Here," he said—and he stuffed a couple of wadded-up bills into the donation bucket cradled in the Reptile's hands. He peered over the Reptile's shoulder, pausing to give me a long, steady look.

"Hey . . . I remember you," I thought he was about to say. But it wasn't recognition I saw in his eyes. It was pity.

"You're very brave," he said. Then with a perfunctory "Merry Christmas" he spun around, stepped back into the house, and shut the door.

Diesel bent over to look into the jar.

"Two stinkin' bucks," he said.

I looked at the jar, too—and the flier taped to it.

"GIVE THE GIFT OF BREATH."

And then I got it. We were such crappy singers, Naughty Boy assumed we had emphysema.

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It was so pathetic it should've been funny, but I wasn't in the mood to laugh. Neither was the Reptile.

"Listen, babe—I want that merchandise, and I'm not leaving this neighborhood till I get it. You understand? So if that was him, you'd better just—"

"How many times do I have to say it? *No.* That was not him."

The lie was sounding weaker with each repetition, but the Reptile seemed to accept it—for the time being.

"All right, let's go then," he said. "But the next time we come to a place with a cheesy-lookin' guy home all by himself, I might just send Diesel in whether you give the signal or not."

Which reminded me that I still didn't know what "the signal" was. But it did a lot more than that. It told me what I had to do.

I had to give the Reptile what he wanted . . . sort of.

As we walked down the long gravel drive toward Knopfler, Diesel began campaigning for a program change. He wanted us to switch to "Jingle Bells" because—"sexular" or not—everybody knew the lyrics. He also wanted us to sing it in four-part harmony. The Reptile rattled the change-filled bucket at him.

"Don't forget, D—we've got em-pha-ma-zema," he said, a freshly lit cigarette dangling from one corner of his mouth. "Sing like you're about to hack up a lung."

Diesel responded with a pouty "Okay," which made him seem a little less scary. But he still had his hand buried in his jacket pocket, and whatever that hand held was still pointed at me and Arlo, so he was scary enough.

We skipped the next two houses. I told the Reptile I knew who lived there, which was half true. The Strassmans were in one. Back in high school, I'd briefly dated their son Josh. Given how that had turned out, I almost hoped Josh was home for the holidays—so I could sic Diesel on the neurotic, grabby, stalker-in-training jerk. The other house was a big Frank Lloyd Wright-type pagoda-style monstrosity that drove out anyone who bought it within three years. I had no idea who lived there now.

The third home was dark and cheerless. There were no strings of lights hung in the trees out front, no electric "icicles" dangling from the gutters, no plastic reindeer on the roof, no wreaths hung on the mailbox or front door, nothing Christmasy at all. In fact, the place would've looked totally abandoned if it weren't for a dull, blue-gray glow that strobed across the front windows—the fluttering light of a television being watched somewhere deep inside the house.

We crowded up onto the porch, and the Reptile flicked his cigarette out onto the lawn, then turned and rang the bell.

"Hey," I said as we stood there waiting for an answer, "what's the signal, anyway?"

"Oh." The Reptile shrugged. "Just say, 'That's him.' "

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Brilliant, huh? The CIA could really use a guy like the Reptile.

We waited.

And waited.

And waited.

"Ring it again," Diesel said after more than a minute had crawled by.

The Reptile leaned forward and hit the button three times, fast—*ding-dong ding-dong ding-dong.*

The flickering glow in the windows disappeared. A distant *thud-thud-thud* grew steadily louder. Someone was coming to the door.

"Get ready," the Reptile said, though I wasn't sure if he was talking to all of us—his carolers—or just Diesel—his muscle.

I got ready anyway, taking a deep breath and wrapping my hand around Arlo's. He turned to give me a look of droopy-eyed surprise just as the door before us opened.

It didn't open far—only wide enough for a man's face to appear. It was a craggy face, the face of a man worn down by his own anger and fear.

And then, as the eyes locked on the ski-masked figures on his porch, it suddenly became a very different kind of face—the face of a man who was screaming his lungs out.

Mr. Macnee had been waiting for decades for *something* to happen—UN troops invading America, federal storm troopers coming to take away his assault rifles, the Men in Black bringing another implant to put in his brain. And now, at last, here it was. The barbarians were finally at the gate.

If I'd started a sing-along by belting out, "Dashing through the snoooow in a one-horse open sleeeeiiigh," maybe we could've calmed him down. *Maybe.* But I didn't. I waited until Mr. Macnee had slammed the door shut—as I'd hoped he would—before turning to the Reptile.

"That's him!"

I shrieked it, because the words weren't just for the Reptile and Diesel. It was for Mr. Macnee, too. I wanted him to have no doubt whatsoever that the goons outside were *after him.*

"Do it," the Reptile said to Diesel, pointing at the door.

Diesel didn't hesitate. He moved forward and stretched out one of his long gorilla arms toward the doorknob.

A loud popping noise made us all jump, and Diesel stopped and stared at something on the door at eye level. It was a few inches to the left of his head. It hadn't been there just a second before.

It was a hole. A fresh *bullet* hole.

That's when I started running, dragging Arlo along with me away from the porch, over the driveway, and across Macnee's side yard. There was another pop, and I heard more pounding footsteps behind me as I headed toward the Strassmans' property.

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"Run!" the Reptile howled.

I glanced over my shoulder, about to say, "What does it look like I'm doing?" But I didn't bother. Behind Diesel and the Reptile, I saw Mr. Macnee stepping out onto his porch.

"Yeah! Run!" I yelled. I let go of Arlo's hand, as I figured by now even he would've gotten the general idea.

I was dodging around trees as I ran, but I still half expected a quick *pop-pop-pop-pop* to bring the four of us down like bowling pins. Mr. Macnee had something else in mind.

"Go!" I heard him shout. "Get 'em, Cujo!"

I can't think of any other words in the English language that can get you to run faster than those. The ground was soggy-wet with snow, but we were zipping over it like it was Astroturf, cutting through backyards in a diagonal from Knopfler Drive to Knob Hill.

Somewhere behind me, I could hear the huffing and puffing of a large animal moving quickly—and it wasn't Diesel. The sound was growing louder by the second. But then from up ahead, a new sound caught my attention. It was as angelic and soothing as Cujo's panting was demonic and alarming. I could see Knob Hill by this point, and it seemed to be bathed in a heavenly light.

A large gaggle of carolers was walking along the road. There were maybe twenty of them in all, each carrying a small candle. They were between us and the cars.

"Si-i-lent niiiight. Ho-o-ly niiiight," they sang. "Aaaall is caaaalm. Aaaall is—"

A sickening ripping sound split the night, followed by a bellowed obscenity. I glanced back again.

A large, lumpy shape had attached itself to the seat of Diesel's camouflage pants. It was an overweight Rottweiler—Cujo. He was trying to dig in his paws, but Diesel had all the momentum of the trucks he was named for, and the big dog was being pulled across the ground like a one-horse open sleigh.

The carolers had stopped to stare at us now, though a few of them were valiantly trying to carry on, crooning about yon virgin mother and the holy infant so tender and mild.

"Sleeeeeep in hea-ven-ly peeeeee-eace. Slee-eep in—"

And that was the end of the heavenly peace. There was another loud *rip,* and Diesel suddenly shot ahead of us—sans pants. We were right on top of our innocent bystanders now, and he barreled through them, knocking carolers and candles alike into the snow. The singer to get the worst of it, I was shocked and pleased to see, was my old boyfriend Josh Strassman, who ended up flat on his back with a boot print on his forehead. The rest of the carolers scattered, screaming.

As Arlo, the Reptile, and I weaved through them, Cujo went

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streaking past, his beady eyes still locked on his chosen target—Diesel's juicy behind. Diesel must have heard the big dog coming, because he looked over his shoulder and reached into his jacket pocket.

"No!" I cried out.

But it was too late. Diesel pulled out his weapon and used it.

It was an ice scraper. He hurled it at Cujo, and the plastic doodad bounced harmlessly off the Rottweiler's broad back.

I'd been "punk'd," as the idiots on MTV used to say. Diesel couldn't have blown my head off. The worst he could have done was scrape the frost off me.

That was it. I was through. I veered off toward my car, threw myself behind the wheel, and tore out of there.

I took one more look back in the rearview mirror as I left. Arlo and the Reptile had made it to the Datsun. Diesel had, too, though he wasn't inside—he was on the roof, one leg hanging perilously over the side. Cujo had clamped his jaws to one of Diesel's combat boots and was thrashing around like a great white shark going to town on a sea lion. The Datsun lurched forward, and Cujo fell to the ground, taking the boot with him. The carolers had regrouped in a semicircle a safe distance away, and they watched it all, looking kind of like the Whos at the end of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas,* except they were confused and appalled instead of joyful and smug.

When I was about a mile away, I pulled over at a convenience store and just sat there in the car for a while, panting. Once I'd caught my breath, I got out and stuffed my ski mask in the garbage can out front. Then I went inside to buy myself a Slurpee to settle my nerves. The little donation jar by the cash register was for the Humane Society, not the American Emphysema Association, but I stuffed in a couple of bucks anyway.

I got home just as Jimmy Stewart was learning that if he'd never lived his wife would've become—fate worse than death!—a librarian. Mom leapt to her feet and rushed to the door as I came in.

"Where have you been? I've been worried sick!"

"I couldn't find that damn book. I was looking all over for it," I said, slipping past her into the oversized closet we jokingly call my "bedroom." My copy of *Mystic River* was buried under a pile of old *Entertainment Weekly*s my mom had snagged from Dr. Roth's office, and I yanked it free and brought it back out to the hallway. "Oh, man—it was here all the time!"

Yeah, I was getting better at lying and manipulating. Practice makes perfect, I guess.

I didn't hear from Arlo that night or the next day—or ever. Maybe he still felt guilty. Maybe he had nothing to say. Or maybe—and I think this is the most likely explanation—he couldn't

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remember my last name or the store where I worked. The guy had a memory like a sponge . . . by which I mean it was soggy and full of holes.

That meant I didn't hear from Diesel and the Reptile, either, which was a nice Christmas present. They didn't have any reason to be mad at me anyway—as far as they knew, I'd told the truth. The ageing horndog who'd bought the fur coat and the jewelry turned out to be a well-armed gun nut. That's just the kind of bad luck you probably get used to when you're an incompetent petty criminal.

It didn't bother me that Diesel and the Reptile got away that night. We'd all had a dose of what one of my more granola college friends used to call "karmic retribution." We'd had evil, selfish thoughts, and because of that we were shot at, chased by an enraged attack dog, and (in one case) de-pantsed in front of a large group of horrified strangers. Lumps of coal in our stockings would've been overkill after a night like that. The universe had already spanked us and sent us to bed without our dinner.

So maybe there really is such a thing as justice. Maybe there really is a Santa Claus. I don't know.

There was a loose end, though—one of the bad guys *did* get away unpunished. And as much as I tried to push it out of my mind, it still cheesed me off. So the next day, I did something about it. Nothing big. Nothing illegal. I'd learned my lesson. I just drove back over to the old neighborhood and dropped off a Christmas card.

Nice, right?

Well, not really. Not if you know what I wrote inside.

Hey, big guy!

Thanks for inviting me over to make a cold winter's night extra HOT!!! I sure hope "Mrs. Claus" doesn't find out how b-a-d you've been! Give me a jingle when you're ready to meet me under the mistletoe again!

XOXOXO,

Your little ho-ho-ho

I sealed the card in a white envelope and kissed the front with lips smeared with my sluttiest hot-pink lipstick. I left it in Naughty Boy's mailbox. It was Christmas Eve, around 9 P.M., and the radio weather guys had already gone into their annual routine about a blip on the radar heading our way from the North Pole.

I didn't know what would happen with the card. Maybe Naughty Boy would get busted, maybe he'd end another year thinking he could get away with anything. It all came down to this: Who would bring in the mail the day after Christmas—him or his wife?

There was no way for me to know. But I'd done my part.

The rest was up to Santa. ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

RAMÓN ACUÑA'S TIME

by Isaac Aisemberg

Translated from the Spanish by Donald A. Yates

And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made.—Genesis, II, 2.

It so happens that the fiesta of the patron saint of Molinos, Our Lady of Candelaria, begins on the twenty-fourth of January and lasts until the celebrants surrender to utter exhaustion. Ramón Acuña, who was not from those parts, heard something about the celebration at the Molinos bank, but, being involved in his own concerns, he paid no attention to it.

Until his death in 1997, Isaac Aisemberg was one of Argentina's most successful crime writers. His celebrated short story "Checkmate in Two Moves" has, to date, been translated into nineteen languages, including English, in the anthology *Latin Blood*, compiled by translator Donald Yates and published in 1972. For many years Mr. Aisemberg was the director of the Argentine National Writers Guild. Mr. Yates was his friend, and suggested that his work be published in *EQMM*.

Acuña had arrived from Buenos Aires not actually hounded by bad luck but rather, undone by his own underhandedness: a cheat at gambling and a perpetrator of shady business deals that rarely produced a gain. For Acuña had always been a petty crook, of no particular stature, one of those fourth-class felons that the police despised so much because they land in jail one day and then through the boredom or oversight of some judge end up out on the street the next. But in Buenos Aires he had run out his string, and even his fellow miscreants wanted nothing to do with him. He was an amateur from the word go.

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So he began to look for new horizons. He saw the need to change the direction of his life and, if such were possible, his lifestyle.

Thus it was that after putting many miles behind him, he ended up in Molinos, situated in the distant northern province of Salta, and there encountered simple country folk, of the sort that extend credit even to strangers, welcoming them with unquestioned trust. He decided to make a new start, and set out to look for honest work. This, perhaps, because in some remote corner of his conscience there still remained traces of a sense of honor, the consequence of some single gene linked to the morality of his faintly remembered dead father, a law-abiding man who had cursed him on his deathbed.

"Can you handle accounting?" Señor Reyes asked him. He was the owner of the town's flour mill, a small-scale business that milled barely eighteen tons of wheat, which arrived from Orán, but that was sufficient to meet the needs of the district.

"I'm good with numbers, and I can manage accounting if it's not too complicated," Ramón replied forthrightly.

Señor Reyes smiled as broadly as his reserved small-town demeanor permitted, thus revealing teeth stained by tobacco and years of sipping on maté tea.

"We have an accountant," Reyes indicated. "You will be his assistant." And in keeping with the custom in Molinos, Ramón was not required to provide an identity card, nor was he asked for references.

They settled on a salary and Ramón took a room in a *pensión,* adapting to town life to the extent that his nature as a drifter permitted him to. For several months he carried out his duties with the seriousness typical of the mill's few employees. In his spare time, he would watch in wonder a spectacle that was completely new to him: the arrival of the wheat-laden trucks that filled the silos, the operation of the milling wheels, and the production of the flour, pure white and smelling of something clean and wholesome, that was finally placed in sacks destined to provide the bread for countless homes in the region.

He liked to stroll through the wide, shadowed streets of Molinos, eyeing the attractive village girls, whom he imagined to be receptive, although he never approached them because women never had any particular appeal for him, save for some fleeting relationship or an occasional physical urge.

He met all of the important men in town: the mayor, the justice of the peace, the police chief, and the pharmacist (there was no doctor). And he ended up sharing a table in the bar with the only Japanese in town, sipping the habitual vermouth while they chatted or discussed things that held little or no significance for him. In time, boredom set in, and along with the lackadaisical mood

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that descended on him, perhaps because of the oppressive heat, there came a faint twinge of nostalgia.

"Damned backwater town!" he grumbled after six months of life in Molinos, depressed by the solitude of his room, from whose window could be seen the single-story homes with red-tile roofs and beyond, far beyond, the mountains, which displayed the complete spectrum of colors of the landscape painter. But there was not even a railroad, only trucks. Nor was Molinos on the bus route. The only way to get out of town was to count on the friendship of one of the truckers or the driver of some passing antediluvian automobile. It turned out that Señor Reyes was the only person in town who owned a car.

Molinos had a small whitewashed church, a relic of the colonial days. Its priest was a corpulent, blond Italian, rotund and self-satisfied, who had come from God knows where. His name was Borello and he had preserved his Lombardic accent.

One day the priest spoke to Ramón:

"I never see you at Mass," he said.

"I've been planning to go," Acuña replied hesitantly.

"I'll be expecting you, then," the priest said, smiling, and continued on his way at a half-trot, as if trying to dodge the brutal rays of the sun that were beating down on the street, punishing the few passersby and a wandering, dazed dog.

I know how you feel, Ramón thought, regarding the poor animal, and headed on to the bank, where he regularly took care of deposits and check-cashing.

The bank teller confided to him.

"I'm from the city of Salta," he said, "and I was terribly bored here until I joined the Social Club."

Ramón had passed by the Social Club several times, but he had always preferred not to go in. Temptation lurked there. He had heard that people played for money, including the mayor, the justice of the peace, the priest (but only the Argentine card game *tute cabrero*), the pharmacist, several businessmen, and flour mill and bank employees.

It was Giménez, the accountant at the mill, who brought up the subject again.

"I'll put your name in and I'm sure that Señor Reyes will second your nomination. He's a member, but he never comes."

Christmas was approaching and the activity at the mill increased. They were not only receiving more grain from the normal sources, but were successful in marketing it all. It was gratifying to see the ancient machinery operating day after day around the clock at top efficiency. At that time, Señor Reyes was on the road from Monday to Saturday and always returned happy, having sold all the flour. An arrangement that used to be advisable only

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from time to time during the rest of the year now became routine. Reyes would leave blank checks that he had signed in advance. When a transaction was completed, the appropriate sum was written in and the accountant provided the second signature that the bank required. Everything was being done at a feverish pace that reminded Ramón of the hectic tempo of life back in Buenos Aires.

Before long, he began to feel that he was coming into his own.

He began showing up at the Social Club soon after his application had been quickly accepted. In the natural course of events, he won and lost, and then won and lost again. His fingers were now itching—as they did every day in Buenos Aires. Fingers that were eager to deal or to pick up cards and embark on a devious hand of poker that vividly brought back memories of his days in the capital.

During the first two weeks of January, Ramón alternated the demanding duties at the mill with visits to the poker tables that were often less than productive.

And when his fortunes hit bottom, Ramón Acuña did three things:

He practiced signing the accountant's name until he could produce a convincing facsimile and began to take forged checks to the bank, where they were cashed on the spot. He filled in the amounts of the checks with discreet sums and then falsified the sales receipts, a procedure that the accountant—a saint—never questioned, in part because the suppliers were so numerous at that time of year. He limited himself to presenting a single forged check at a time, so as not to arouse suspicion. And no one was the wiser. The activity at the bank was intense as well, because all the local businesses and their clientele were as busy as the mill.

The third step he carried out on the next Sunday. Inspired by the concept of public relations, he appeared at church and cordially acknowledged the presence of the faithful gathered there. Among those present was Señor Reyes, resplendent in his white Sunday outfit, alongside Señora Reyes, elegant, attractive, and subtly provocative. Reyes nodded his head with a certain air of solemn superiority, mixed with Christian fervor. And Ramón, following another direction of his plan, took confession—to the extent that in his position he could unburden his soul—bringing the wafer to his mouth and taking Holy Communion. After Mass, as he was leaving, the priest came up and spoke to him softly.

"We know that the paths that lead to God are infinite. It is all a question of choosing the right way."

His words were colored by his Lombardic accent. What he said was expressed in the tone of a holy saint who believes in and loves his fellow man and has complete faith in his ministry. Ramón considered that possibly he had overdone the dramatization of his religious fervor.

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When he had finally made his way outside, the noon sun was beating down on the sidewalk and its brightness was nearly blinding. A glance at the brilliant blue sky told him that there was no hope for the slightest breeze to be stirred up. The air was oppressive and he felt like a hunk of meat in a stewing pot. He was assailed by a disturbing thought, but he dismissed it immediately. It was not right, the atheist and scoundrel said to himself, to bring God and the Devil together.

"Shall I take you somewhere?" asked Señor Reyes, pointing out his splendid late-model automobile. "I can take you to the bar or to the club."

"Thank you, sir," Ramón replied in a cultivated pious tone. "I attend Mass only rarely, but when I do, I like to sit alone in my room afterward and meditate."

He settled into the backseat of the car while Reyes took the wheel, seated next to Señora Reyes, who turned back toward Ramón, offering a friendly smile floating on a wave of perfume. The car started up, and Ramón could not repress a wave of envy toward Señor Reyes for his fine automobile and his lovely wife.

He tried to imagine what his old companions in Buenos Aires would think of him now. Arancibia, who knew what the north of the country was like, would probably say:

"Ramón has gone off his nut because of the sun, or maybe the lure of some lacy handkerchief doused in the perfume used by Señora Reyes."

Arancibia was an habitué of police stations and rarely emerged from the lower levels of the Hall of Justice.

Zaldívar, from the capital, who more than once occupied a cell in Villa Devoto Prison (in Buenos Aires) and was often a guest of the Olmos Prison (in La Plata), would doubtless observe:

"Ramón is getting on. He's doing a fine job. He has finally learned to take note of the things that are going on around him. Now he's a real professional."

On the morning of the twenty-third of January he cashed another of the special checks. The bank was crowded with people who were animatedly discussing something that was apparently of great importance. The teller blurted out a stream of words that mixed together things he didn't understand with the possibilities of romancing a few of the local females.

That night he went to the club. His fellow poker players were the chief of police, the pharmacist, and the justice of the peace. The card play was spirited. When dawn arrived, the only players left were those at Ramón Acuña's table. Ramón had started out with an incredible run of luck, and then began to lose consistently, until all that remained were a few coins in his pocket. A handful of small coins that weighed like lead.

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He stumbled out of the club. The night was cool and the last of the stars shone brightly, seeming almost just within reach. Still, he thought in his humiliation, this was no time to be admiring the heavens. Moreover, he was sweating profusely, as if he were walking under the merciless sun that cracked open the earth and drove moisture out of the walls of the houses.

It was then that an idea that had been lurking in the back of his mind suddenly turned into a plan. So far, he had been taking single checks to the bank for fairly unimportant amounts. It was time now for a master move. The plan consisted in filling out several checks for large amounts, taking them to the bank and turning them into cash, and then getting a truck driver to take him to a neighboring town. And from there to another town that had a railroad station or that was on the bus route, and then disappear forever from Salta, from Molinos, from that suffocating town where, it was clear, there was no future for him.

He calmed down and slowly his confidence began to return. Deliberately, without altering his pace, he turned in the direction of the mill. Night was surrendering to dawn now, and dawn to the early-morning glimmer of the warming sun that was now appearing on the horizon. The mill was located on the outskirts of town and that gave him time to calculate the amounts he would place on the checks.

At that hour, there was no other soul about.

It was after seven in the morning of an inevitably torrid summer day. He could be sure that the townspeople would be snoring away in their gentle and blessed dreams.

There was no one around when he entered the mill office, whose door was never locked. The office was located in front of the silos and set aside from the main part of the operation.

He sat down at his desk. He didn't need to turn the light on. He took the pre-signed checks from the accountant's desk and began filling in the figures, then writing in the amounts, and once more imitating Giménez's signature.

He didn't hear the distant sound of an automobile that drove up and stopped. Nor did he hear the footsteps of someone approaching. Perhaps the sound of the car and the footsteps had been covered by the sound of the mill grinding on in full operation.

He looked up suddenly and encountered the angry gaze of Señor Reyes.

The expression on Ramón Acuña's face was not that of a model employee. On the contrary, it was that of a criminal, a thief, an embezzler caught with his hands in the till.

"What are you up to, Acuña?" Señor Reyes demanded.

"Sir . . . I . . ."

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Señor Reyes snatched one of the checks from the desk, and then another.

Acuña was paralyzed, tears in his eyes, his face frozen.

"Swindling me, eh?"

"Señor Reyes . . ." Acuña managed to stammer. "I . . . I swear this is the first time." It was the whining of a trapped animal.

Señor Reyes took a deep breath, regarding him with scorn. And perhaps that scorn was the cause of what happened afterwards. One can perhaps foresee certain things, but there are others that are not within the grasp of decent men like Señor Reyes, a simple miller from a town of humble people. There are the deceptions. Dark acts committed by the black sheep of the Lord's flock.

Señor Reyes's first intention was to gather up the checks, but he hesitated. Perhaps the poor devil who had gone astray would tear them up himself. Every sinner has his chance for redemption.

"Get out of here, Acuña. People like you make me sick. I don't want to lay eyes on you again. Not here and not in town."

Acuña didn't move. He was riveted to the chair, a miserable soul bathed in sweat. Señor Reyes turned and walked out of the room. Acuña finally drew air into his lungs. This was the moment to destroy the checks and run out. He had read that unexpected opportunity in Señor Reyes's eyes.

But there before him were the checks, urging him on. He stuffed them into his pocket and followed Reyes. The owner of the mill was striding decisively toward the silos. He was doubtless going to check on the latest deliveries. This was clearly more important to him than the squashed cockroach that he had left behind. Señor Reyes agilely climbed up the stairway that led to the top of one of the silos. Ramón was trailing him. He felt a sense of lightness that he had never known before.

He caught up with Reyes when he was looking down into the interior of the silo. Ramón's hand reached out for something and found a large set of iron tongs that someone had left there, and before Reyes could react he struck at him viciously until the man fell down, his head a battered and bloody mess. Ramón Acuña sucked into his lungs all the air in the world. He rejoiced.

If I throw him into the silo, he thought, *he won't be found for days.* An improvised crime, to be sure, but a perfect one.

He immediately set to work. But suddenly he had to stop. Two mill workers were approaching along the main walk below. By pure chance they didn't glance up toward where the attack had taken place.

Ramón moved the body away from the edge of the stairs to keep it from falling. He laid down the heavy tongs that carried the imprint of his bloody fingerprints.

He was now seized by a sudden sense of panic that had erupted

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from some corner of his conscience. He hastily went down the stairs, arranging his clothes and trying to produce a smile on his parched lips. But the workers had already disappeared into the shed where the empty flour sacks were stored.

Ramón Acuña went over to Señor Reyes's automobile. The key was in the ignition. A satisfied and calmer smile came over his face. It was still his time to be lucky. He noticed that the fuel-gauge needle rested almost at empty.

In a few minutes he had reached town and parked near the bank. It was three minutes to eight o'clock. He had to wait only 180 seconds. The seconds ticked by and the three minutes were up.

At that moment several loud explosions broke the silence. The homeless, flea-bitten dog he had seen in the streets before came running up to him. His ears were laid back and his tail was between his legs. The dog looked at him, terrified. He was asking for protection.

At that moment, in the distance, the sound of strident music could be heard, apparently produced by out-of-tune violins and wind instruments to the accompaniment of rocket bombs.

Ramón was the only person in the street, which was strangely empty for eight o'clock in the morning. Suddenly, in the distance, he saw a group of bedraggled children, none of whom could be older than seven. They were laughing and cavorting in a ragged procession. Behind them came the miserable band, playing a monotonous and tuneless march.

Then came another group of older children, dancing, leaping about, and circling the band like a swarm of bluebottle flies.

And after them, preceded by a group of barefoot men, husky and sweaty, came a rustic altar adorned with ribbons and rosettes of bright colors.

And after them a group of village girls in their best outfits, which accented wide hips, breasts as full as ripe peaches, shapely legs, and feet adorned in high heels, no doubt the alluring local girls that the bank teller had referred to. They kept their gaze lowered, and in their hands they held rosaries and missals.

Next came horsemen, the typical northern gauchos with their wide-brimmed hats, seated on high saddles, riding on elegantly trimmed horses.

And then the pharmacist and his wife, the police chief and his wife, the mayor and his wife, and the schoolteachers in their white smocks, each carrying an Argentine flag.

Another rocket went off and the sound momentarily blotted out the squeal of the music. The miserable, terrified dog quickly crawled under the automobile.

Ramón watched other townspeople parade by—Gutiérrez, the

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bank teller, other workers from the mill—as well as people from other nearby towns and the truckers that brought the wheat and others that carried off the flour. The band continued playing and then was joined by the church bells that began to peal.

He saw him as if he were by himself but still a part of the celebration: the Japanese from the bar, wearing a long jacket, a caricature of the Emperor. A few steps behind came the Turk, Salim, who owned the hardware store, decked out as if he were going to a wedding. And then there were women dressed in black with colorful kerchiefs on their heads, with their youngsters and babies, and high-spirited young girls, and excited dogs barking at everyone. It was the very picture of simple joy, a fiesta celebration.

They were all on their way to celebrate the day of the Virgin of Candelaria, whose image occupied the main altar of the church.

And Ramón, again transfixed, saw the priest Borello join the procession. The priest spied him and greeted him with the serene confidence of the blessed, exuding a sense of satisfaction over having brought his flock together.

And now Ramón Acuña understood that January twenty-fourth had arrived. The festival would last for nine days, during which everything would be shut down, closed, locked up: the bank, the gas station, all businesses except the mill, which would continue operating at full capacity so that there could be bread on everyone's table. And during those nine days no trucks, save for those carrying flour, would leave the place. And now he could not return with the automobile to the mill and arrange to get a ride out of town seated next to some willing trucker.

Here was Señora Reyes, alone, waiting for her husband, who would surely arrive at any moment, and looking suspiciously at the car in which Ramón was seated.

Now he was isolated, there in the automobile, with no gas, with the worthless checks, as useless as the few coins in his pocket that seemed to be burning his body, as if the sun had penetrated his clothes and his flesh, while his feet and hands were like ice and his heart as heavy as lead. And back there was the body of Señor Reyes, on the upper level of the silo, within full view of any worker who might pass by.

He remembered the confused words about the fiesta that now whirled around in his exhausted memory, and accepted the fact that his time had finally come. ●

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Art by Allen Davis

PARIS MASQUE

by Edward D. Hoch

The masquerade at Le Jules Verne was a party for charity that had somehow grown into the social event of the Paris season. When Rand announced to his wife Leila that they'd be traveling to the French capital via the Chunnel to attend it, she thought he was crazy. "A masquerade?" she repeated.

Rand nodded. "You're to come as your favorite Jules Verne character, but not as Verne himself."

Leila snorted. "That lets me out! He never wrote about women."

"Oh, come on!"

"Can you name me a woman in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea?* Or *The Mysterious Island,* or *Journey to the Center of the Earth?*"

"It's been a long time since I read them," Rand admitted. "It seems to me the professor's niece was mentioned in *Journey,* but I can't remember her name. What about *Around the World in Eighty Days?* Didn't Phileas Fogg rescue some Indian widow who was about to be burned alive with her dead husband? In fact, I believe he married her."

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"Her name was Aouda," Leila confirmed with some reluctance.

"Then it's settled. I'll go as Fogg and you can be Aouda. All you'll need is a sari and mask; I can get away with some Victorian garb, whiskers, and a top hat."

"And a pocket watch," Leila reminded him. "Time was very important to Phileas Fogg."

"Then you'll do it?"

"Of course not! Just what got you started on this, anyway?"

He sighed, deciding to admit the truth. "I've come to realize you can never quite retire from Intelligence work."

"This is another government job?"

The idea for Edward D. Hoch's new story—a masquerade at the Eiffel Tower—came to him while he was watching the 1930s film *Madame Satan,* about a masquerade party that takes place on a zeppelin tethered to a tower. Mr. Hoch develops from this small seed, and from some factual references (there really is a Jules Verne restaurant at the Eiffel Tower), a typically inventive tale that's all his own.

"In a sense. The guest of honor at this masquerade will be Ivor Lindgrad, the legendary Swedish publisher who now lives in London. There've been threats on his life, which isn't surprising, but in this instance the French government has asked MI5 for assistance. They think Lindgrad could be a terrorist target."

Rand caught the sudden understanding in his wife's eyes. "The Eiffel Tower!"

"Exactly. Terrorists have threatened for years to blow up the Tower, and what better time than a party for Ivor Lindgrad, publisher of a string of conservative newspapers?"

"Killing two birds with one stone."

"You might say," he agreed.

"All the more reason for us to stay away from Le Jules Verne."

The famed restaurant was located in the Eiffel Tower, of course, and had been since 1983. Its spectacular view of the city from 400 feet above the ground was unequaled in Paris. The very thought of a masquerade party in such a place was almost surrealistic. For one thing, the restaurant had a policy against parties or charity events, catering only to individual customers. "This is probably a once-in-a-lifetime event for them, and I can't go without you," Rand argued. "I'd be spotted at once as some sort of security guard."

"Don't worry, dear, you're too old to be taken for a security guard."

"It might be fun," he pleaded.

"More fun than danger?"

"I guarantee it!"

"When is this party?" she asked with obvious reluctance.

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Rand and Leila arrived by way of the Chunnel on a Friday afternoon in late May, the day before the scheduled party. Awakening in their hotel room at dawn, Rand opened the window and felt again the youthful joy of one's first morning in Paris. An hour later he had reason to remember something he'd read about the city. "Someone once said there are few things more delightful than a French breakfast."

They were eating in their room, and Leila could see the Eiffel Tower from her chair. "That's where we're going to be tonight?"

Rand nodded. "The restaurant is on the second tier, almost halfway to the top. Did you know they were going to tear the whole thing down in nineteen ten? It was saved by advances in wireless telegraphy and radio, and the need for transmission towers in high places."

"You're a storehouse of odd facts," she told him, not for the first time.

After a leisurely breakfast they dressed and walked over to the secondhand book stalls that lined the Seine. On his few visits to the city he'd always managed a stop there. The stalls extended for two and a half miles, making it perhaps the longest library in the world. His French was not good, but there was always some treasure to be found, often in English.

"I'd forgotten how much I liked this city," Leila said.

"We should come more often."

They were turning back toward the hotel when a familiar figure hailed him. "Rand, old chap! I thought it was you."

He recognized the stout gray-haired man as Sir John Mallory, a former Scotland Yard man who'd moved to Paris and taken one of the top jobs at Interpol. "Sir John! Good to see you again. You remember Leila."

"Of course. Charmed to see you both. I do believe the two of you are ageless."

"Do you prowl the book stalls often?"

"At least once a week. It's one of the joys of the city. I gather you're in for tonight's party."

"Well, yes," Rand admitted.

"There may be more security people there than friends of Lindgrad. The French, British, and Swedes all have agents, and Interpol, of course."

"I'm hardly an agent. I've been retired for decades."

"They want to fill the room with memories. The idea is that one of us might recognize an assassin if he's an expert. They don't send boys to kill someone like Ivor Lindgrad."

"Does he have that many enemies?" Leila asked. "I only know him as the publisher of a string of scandal tabloids in various

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countries. I don't think of him as political."

"Once he's dead, his sons would sell the tabloid empire in a minute. That's when it would become politically important."

Leila wasn't convinced. "I'd think he had more to fear from people whose lives he ruined with his scandal sheets."

Sir John considered that. "Revenge rather than gain? Perhaps. In any event, we'll be watching. What characters will you be at the masquerade?"

Rand smiled. "Phileas Fogg and the Indian princess Aouda. What about you?"

"Captain Nemo. I was searching just now for some sort of old logbook I might carry."

"Good luck. We'll see you there this evening."

For his costume, Rand relied on a full-page illustration of Phileas Fogg from one of numerous editions of the 1873 novel. It showed a man of perhaps forty years with handsome features and a tall, well-shaped body. His hair and beard were reddish blond, and he wore a gray suit, vest, high-collared shirt with red tie, and a top hat. Rand would never look forty again, but he relied on the hair and beard to cover much of his face. He carried the necessary pocket watch, and despite Leila's protests brought along his cell phone as well. Since this was a masquerade, a small domino mask was added. For her part, Leila wore a rose-colored sari with a dark wig and mask. Her half-Egyptian features could pass as Indian without any makeup.

They taxied to the Tower, arriving a bit before eight. The announced plan was for two hours of drinking and a charity auction, with the unmasking at ten o'clock, followed by dinner. One of the restaurant's specialties, matelote of grouper with mushroom and artichoke ravioli, would be served. "It's amazing how a man like Lindgrad can inspire such a social evening," Leila observed. "His journalism is hardly something to be admired."

"Perhaps people were afraid not to come."

"What is *that?*" Leila exclaimed as they waited for the south-pillar elevator to the restaurant. Confronting them was a masked young woman wearing two long foam-rubber tentacles on her arms and trailing eight smaller tentacles behind her.

"I'm the cuttlefish from *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea,*" she announced.

The young man with her added, "And I'm Ned Land, who gets to harpoon her on the next page. That'll be fun!" He lifted his weapon into the air.

"How will they let you past security with that?" Leila wondered.

"The tip is rubber." He demonstrated with his fingers.

"You're English?" Rand asked, judging their accents.

"You'll have to wait till the unmasking," the cuttlefish teased.

They passed through a metal detector and rode the elevator to

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the second landing. Because Le Jules Verne was a small gourmet restaurant, party invitations had been limited to ninety people. The guests had to provide photo IDs as they left the elevator, and had to momentarily remove their masks to confirm their identities. The décor of the place was a muted black and gray that served to emphasize the metal structure of the Tower. There were small diamond-shaped windows behind the bar and along part of one wall. Banquettes and tables with slender metal chairs occupied portions of two walls, with glass walls all around open to the Paris view. Larger tables, one of them round, filled the center of the room. At the moment, the round table was draped with a gold cloth that reached to the floor. It held an easeled portrait of Jules Verne as well as party favors and items for the charity auction. Rand saw no sign of the kitchen and assumed it must be above or below the dining floor.

Promptly at eight o'clock, a balding man in a dark blue suit appeared in the center of the room, in front of the table. "Ladies and gentlemen, good evening and welcome to a celebration of Jules Verne, which is also a celebration of the world-renowned publisher Ivor Lindgrad. My name is Georges Renauld and I am the manager here. Our space is a bit limited, but we hope you'll all enjoy yourselves. The charity auction will take place in about an hour, followed by the grand unmasking at ten, after which dinner will be served. Your host for the evening, none other than Jules Verne himself, will be joining you in a few moments."

There was a round of applause as the manager exited the room. Rand and Leila gazed about the place at the variety of costumed guests, most of whom seemed to be male, and finally gravitated to the table with their elevator companions, Ned Land and the cuttlefish. Any kind of sitting in her costume was proving difficult for the young woman. "These damn tentacles get in the way!" she grumbled.

"We work in Lindgrad's London office," the harpooner confessed to them. "Name's Scott Peele and this is Emma Frank. She's one of his secretaries. The boss is coming as Verne himself. That's why no one else could be Verne."

He'd barely uttered the words when a man in a Victorian suit and drooping bow tie hobbled into the dining room, supporting himself with a cane. The resemblance to the portrait of Jules Verne was remarkable, with his full beard flecked with gray and his hair almost white. He hardly needed the mask to conceal his identity, since a buzz went up immediately that this was Ivor Lindgrad himself. Rand saw Sir John Mallory, in his Captain Nemo costume, hurry over to introduce himself. They shook hands and parted. None of the other guests approached Verne, pretending they had no idea of his identity.

"What's wrong with his foot?" Emma the cuttlefish wondered.

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"He was fine earlier when I brought him the costume."

"His suit and beard look quite authentic," Leila commented.

"I used that same picture the banquet manager has for his sign. He sent me a copy. I think it was the frontispiece from one of Verne's books."

Leila's gaze was roving over the room. "Jeffery?"

"What is it?"

"Look around us. There are at least six other women wearing saris like mine."

"But none half so lovely," he answered gallantly.

"Be serious! The other women either came as male characters or cuttlefish."

"There's only one cuttlefish in the room, Leila."

She sighed and then started in again, keeping her voice low. "What's the good of metal detectors at the door when they have knives at everyone's place setting?"

"Restaurants don't use plastic knives."

"Tell me one more thing. You and Sir John and heaven knows who else are here in hopes of recognizing a possible assassin or terrorist before he has a chance to strike. How do you hope to recognize anyone at a masquerade?"

He had to admit it was a logical question. "After the masks come off—"

"If there is a plot of some sort, after the masks come off will be too late."

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of one of the sari-clad women at the table. "There are a lot of Aoudas here tonight, aren't there?" she said amiably to Leila. "I'm Charmian Noel. I helped organize this tribute to Mr. Lindgrad. Are you enjoying your evening so far?"

She was a handsome middle-aged Frenchwoman with a good command of English. Rand smiled and introduced himself and Leila. "This is a fine place for a party. The view is magnificent."

"Isn't it, though? Sir John Mallory suggested that you might help me with the auction."

"I don't—" he began to protest.

"All you need to do is stand up there with Jules Verne and me. Each donated item is tagged with a number. Just pass them along when I call the number."

"Go ahead," Leila urged, and Rand followed the woman to the center of the floor.

Verne shook his hand and muttered something. Charmian Noel introduced herself and explained, "We've corresponded by e-mail. It's a pleasure to meet you at last."

"The pleasure is mine," he assured her in a soft voice.

She quickly explained the plan for the auction. "Mr. Rand here

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will locate each item by its numbered tag while I read off a description and call for bids. Guests have been invited to bring their checkbooks. Each winning bidder will write out a check and bring it up here. You simply congratulate each one and hand over the auctioned item."

He nodded in agreement while Rand looked over the score of items to be auctioned. Most were small things of moderate value: autographed first editions of British and French writers, a passable painting of the Eiffel Tower, an original illustration from a recent edition of *From the Earth to the Moon.* There was even a framed photograph of the Tower spewing fireworks as part of the millennium celebration.

"We'll open with item number one," Charmian Noel announced as Rand located a rock the size of his fist with sparkles of quartz crystals in it. "This is said to be one of the original rocks brought back by Professor Hardwigg on his *Journey to the Center of the Earth.*"

That statement brought a ripple of laughter from the room, but a man at the front table quickly bid one hundred euros. Rand was nonplussed when the item finally went for two hundred fifty euros to a woman fetchingly dressed as Hardwigg himself. She paused after accepting the rock to plant a kiss on Verne's hairy cheek, bringing forth another round of laughter. After that, the auction proceeded at a leisurely pace. By twenty to ten all the items had been sold, bringing in a goodly sum.

"I'm glad that's over," Rand said as he returned to Leila's side.

"You may want to refill your glasses," Charmian Noel announced. "The masks come off in twenty minutes."

There was a milling about as waiters came forward with trays of cocktails and wine. "Who's the woman in the Hardwigg costume?" Rand asked Scott Peele. "The first bidder, the one who kissed Lindgrad."

"Don't know. From this distance I didn't even realize it was a woman. Perhaps it's an ex-wife or old mistress. He's had plenty of both. They say a Frenchwoman drowned herself in the Seine last year because of him."

"Stop it, Scott!" the cuttlefish warned. "That was just a nasty rumor."

But Peele only snorted. "The Lindgrad empire was built on nasty rumors."

Charmian Noel walked back to the center table, standing beside Jules Verne. "Now, ladies and gentlemen, the evening's big moment—the unmasking! The lights will be turned off for thirty seconds, and when they come on again, we will all be our true selves. Ideally we should remain masked until the traditional witching hour of midnight, but I think you'll agree it's much easier to eat dinner without these masks and wigs and beards." She

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reached for her own domino mask and the room went dark.

The seconds were filled with murmurs, and a few playful screams from the women. Rand removed his mask and the wig he'd worn beneath his hat. A bit of outside light enabled him to see Leila removing her mask as well. Then the lights went back on and someone gasped.

Jules Verne lay unmasked on the floor by the round table, his beard and wig and cane by his side. Charmian and the banquet manager were already bending over him. "He's been shot!" Charmian called out. "Help, someone! It's Ivor Lindgrad!"

But even before Rand reached her side he saw the bullet wound between Lindgrad's eyes, and he knew the man was dead.

"I saw him fall," Georges Renauld said. "At least I saw someone, silhouetted against the windows. How could this be?"

Sir John Mallory had joined them from his nearby table, issuing rapid orders. "Seal this floor! No one leaves! Rand, help me, will you? I want everyone kept here until the police arrive."

Two security men were summoned from other tables and tried to calm the frightened guests. An older woman had already fainted and was being cared for by her husband and others. "Please stay calm!" Sir John told them. "We don't know what happened but if everyone remains seated we'll get to the bottom of this."

There was very little blood around the bullet wound, and powder burns seemed to indicate the shot had been fired from no more than a foot or two away. Rand touched a careful little finger to the wound and it came away with only a few grains of powder on it. Someone in the room was sobbing quietly but many of the others had been stunned into silence.

Renauld called to a waiter to bring a tablecloth and cover the body. "Mr. Lindgrad arrived early, before the other guests," he told Rand and Sir John. "We had a nice chat. He seemed quite at ease then, looking forward to the evening."

Scott Peele had come up to join them. "I believe I'm the senior employee here from Mr. Lindgrad's London office," he told Sir John. "I must be allowed to phone my superiors with this terrible news."

Sir John scowled. "Wait a bit until the police arrive. There'll be plenty of time for phone calls later."

"What about that woman?" Peele asked, pointing toward the one who'd kissed Lindgrad, now revealed to be quite feminine without her Hardwigg disguise and mask. "She's on a cell phone this very minute!"

"Who are you calling?" Sir John demanded.

She smiled and snapped the cell phone shut. "My paper. I'm Mandy Blake, style editor for the *International Herald Tribune.*"

"You told them—"

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"Of course I told them! Ivor Lindgrad is a giant in publishing. This is front-page news."

"Perhaps," Rand suggested, "you should have waited until we verified the dead man's identity."

He smiled inwardly at the shock on her face. "You mean it's not—"

"I don't know."

But Scott Peele spoiled his momentary pleasure. "It's Mr. Lindgrad, all right. I see him every day when he's in London."

The woman relaxed her grip on the cell phone. Already they could hear the approach of police cars, their pulsating sirens cutting through the night air.

Rand asked, "Does anyone know why he was limping and using a cane?"

Mandy Blake supplied the answer. "I read up on Verne for the party. In eighteen eighty-six his deranged nephew tried to kill him with two shots. One bullet hit Verne in the left shin and he limped for the rest of his life."

"A really accurate portrayal," Leila commented, "unless it was really Jules Verne. And his nephew was a better shot this time."

Their promised gourmet dinner all but forgotten, the guests lined up for more searches and questioning by the police. Metal detectors were used to comb the room thoroughly but no gun was found. While Renauld passed out gift certificates for free dinners, Sir John Mallory huddled with French detectives. It soon became obvious that no one had seen anything unusual, nor had anyone heard a shot. "A silencer," someone suggested, but Rand was quick to point out that a silencer attached to the murder weapon made an even greater bulk to slip past the metal detectors.

"Those powder burns," Sir John noted. "The fatal shot was fired from close up?"

"And in the dark," Rand reminded him.

They took Charmian Noel aside for questioning. Renauld let them use his tiny office while he phoned the bad news to the restaurant's owners. Rand lifted a pile of menus off a chair and sat down, taking in the usual desk photos of wife and daughter, the framed wall photo of Renauld with the former president of the French Republic. A bookshelf held volumes on restaurant management along with a slim biography of Jules Verne. When Renauld had left them alone with the Frenchwoman, Sir John outlined the facts to her. "The killer fired in the dark, only a foot or two away from Lindgrad. You were standing near him. You must have seen or heard something."

"Nothing," she insisted, seeming a bit irritated at his unstated suspicion. "I heard no shot. There was some movement from Lindgrad and I supposed he was removing his mask and beard. Then

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the lights came on and Renauld was bending over his body."

"Mask," Rand repeated, half to himself. Then, "Did you and Lindgrad talk at all after I returned to my seat?"

"Talk? I don't believe so, no. As I said, we'd only corresponded by e-mail. I didn't really know the man."

"Who set up the schedule for the evening—the auction, unmasking, and dinner?"

"I worked it out with the restaurant and informed Mr. Lindgrad of it. He was agreeable."

"The restaurant—?"

"This was very special because of Lindgrad's stature and the prime guest list. Le Jules Verne never has parties or charity events, and usually they stop serving dinner at ten. It was not easy persuading Mr. Renauld to make concessions, but I just couldn't resist the idea of a Jules Verne masquerade once it occurred to me. When I told him the event would honor Ivor Lindgrad he agreed at once. Somehow he sold the idea to his superiors."

"And he was there when the lights went on," Rand said, thinking out loud.

"No good," Sir John said, reading his thoughts. "I searched Renauld myself. No gun, nothing that could have been used as a gun. If he'd wanted to kill Lindgrad I'm sure he could have done it with a steak knife."

Rand stood up, shaking his head. "Something's missing. If you'll excuse me, Sir John."

He left them in the little office and returned to the dining room. Each table was being called separately for questioning, lining up as if for a wedding buffet. Police technicians were still photographing the body, with a makeshift screen of tablecloths blocking the view of their activities. He waited until they finished and the attendants unfolded a plastic body bag. Ivor Lindgrad was rolled over but there was nothing beneath the body. Rand lifted the gold tablecloth to peer at the floor beneath the round table, but it was empty.

"What were you looking for?" Leila asked as he returned to their table.

"I didn't find it," was all he said.

The cuttlefish stretched her tentacles. "You must be someone important to roam around like that. Can't you get us out of here any faster?"

"Calm down, Emma," Scott Peele told her. "We're the next table to be called."

Rand shook his head sadly. "You two probably knew him better than anyone else here. I'm afraid they'll want an extensive interview with you both."

"But we don't know anything!" she argued. "How could we have shot him from way over here?"

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Rand shrugged. "How could anyone have shot him from two feet away, without a gun?"

"Was that what you were looking for on the floor?" Leila asked.

"No, there's something even more important missing from the scene. Ivor Lindgrad's mask."

It was true. Though the false beard and wig had been found next to the body, the domino mask he'd been wearing was nowhere in sight. "But we all have masks," Leila pointed out, "everyone except the waiters and bartender and Renauld. And none of them needed one."

Rand stared at the line of people still being questioned. The body bag had been placed on the stretcher and was being carried out. He saw Mandy Blake, from the newspaper, raising her cell phone and stepped quickly over to grab it from her. "This is one of those photo phones. Have you sent a picture of that body bag to your paper?"

"I didn't have a chance to! You grabbed it before I could."

"Put it in your pocket and keep it there."

Sir John had finished his interrogation of Charmian Noel. Rand wrote a name on a piece of notepaper and handed it to the Interpol man. "Can you check on this name for me? Right now?"

"For what? A criminal record?"

"Anything."

Sir John looked sceptical. "All right," he agreed. "Give me your number and I'll call you if I have anything." Rand jotted down the number of the cell phone in his pocket.

Leila came up to him. "Can't we leave now? I could use something to eat."

"I'm sure everyone could. It shouldn't be much longer."

Emma Frank had managed to detach herself from the foam-rubber tentacles and was starting to look halfway human. "There! That's better."

"At least your costume was unique," he told her. "I should have suggested it to my wife instead of the sari."

"Oh, I'm sure there are women lurking somewhere in Verne, but after skimming through *The Mysterious Island* and *Around the Moon* and a few others I decided it was the cuttlefish for me."

"More of a squid, isn't it?" Rand asked as they waited in line.

"Verne called it a cuttlefish and that's a nicer word than squid."

"I can't argue with that."

The line was moving faster as the Paris police officers took down names and addresses, checked passports where necessary, and asked a few routine questions. The guests were too important to be kept inconvenienced for long. Finally it was over, and the costumed guests lined up for the elevators, each giving their impressions of what they had seen, and not seen. Georges Renauld stood by with a basket of party favors and his apologies. "Please come

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back to Le Jules Verne," he pleaded. "Present your gift certificate and you will receive our finest gourmet meal free of charge."

As they waited for the elevator Rand whispered into Leila's ear and slipped away to the men's room. He waited there, hidden in the last cubicle, until all was silent. His watch told him it was after one o'clock. Someone opened the men's room door and snapped off the light. He waited another ten minutes and finally emerged, moving silently across the restaurant floor. The place was dark and apparently deserted, though the outside lights were enough to guide his progress.

He reached the round table and dropped to his knees. He'd glanced beneath the floor-length gold tablecloth earlier, but now he took the time to feel up under the table itself.

That was when his cell phone rang.

He answered immediately, hoping no one else had heard it. "Yes?"

"Rand, this is Sir John. You were right in your suspicion. There was a scandal last year and a young woman drowned in the Seine. She was his daughter."

Suddenly the room was filled with light. Rand looked up to see Georges Renauld not ten feet away, pointing a revolver at his head.

"I'm pleased to see the missing weapon has turned up," he said, laying the cell phone on the carpet.

"You should have left with the others," Renauld told him. "Now I'll have to kill you, too."

"It was your daughter, wasn't it? The girl whose picture is on your desk. There was no terrorist threat against Ivor Lindgrad. Terrorists would have gone after the Eiffel Tower at the same time. This was a personal motive. You blamed Lindgrad for your daughter's suicide."

"That man lived off the suffering of others. It's a better world without him." He steadied the gun, holding it with both hands. "How did you know I killed him?"

"The mask. And the cane. The mask was missing and the cane was there, even though Lindgrad's secretary hadn't provided it with his costume. I got to thinking about masquerade parties. With that mask and wig and beard, anyone about the same size as Lindgrad could have been standing up there. Only Sir John and Charmian Noel actually spoke to him, and neither had met him before. I saw Sir John introduce himself, and the Noel woman had only corresponded by e-mail. You simply masqueraded as Ivor Lindgrad masquerading as Jules Verne. You knew about Verne's limp and brought a cane, something Lindgrad didn't have. A biography of Verne in your office would have supplied that information. I think you shot him prior to the arrival of the first guests at eight o'clock. You said you'd chatted with him then. It would have

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been easy enough to do before the waiters and bartender came on duty, muffling the shot with a towel or napkin. You already had an identical costume prepared. Since you'd sent Lindgrad a picture of Verne in the first place, you knew what his costume would look like."

"And what did I do with the body?"

"You simply hid it beneath this round table, behind the gold cloth. At the appointed time you left the room and quickly changed into your Verne costume. Naturally we all thought it was Lindgrad. You and Charmian Noel had worked out the timing in advance, so you knew you'd have thirty seconds to make the switch. As soon as the place was in near darkness you pulled out the body and yanked off your costume, probably a breakaway one equipped with Velcro fasteners, and hid it with your wig and beard up under the table where you'd nailed a little board to serve as a shelf. I just found the board, but of course you removed the costume as soon as the guests and police departed. The gun was one you'd probably kept in your office for years. But you made two mistakes. In your haste to pull out the body, you forgot that Lindgrad hadn't been wearing his mask when you shot him. Your own mask and wig and costume went up on the shelf and it was too late to retrieve the mask. Another mistake was the condition of the wound. It hadn't bled much, and when I touched it with my finger I found only specks of the gunpowder. The blood was already dry."

"I don't care," he said. "I did what I had to do."

A low whine reached them and Renauld shifted position so he could see the elevator. "What's that?"

"I imagine it'll be Sir John Mallory. He's been listening to our conversation on my cell phone."

Rage filled Renauld's eyes and he squeezed the trigger of his gun. Rand froze at the sound of the shot, but the bullet was aimed not at him but at the cell phone, which flew apart on impact. Then the elevator door slid open. Renauld saw Sir John and a half-dozen French police. Before they could act, he put the gun to his temple and fired one last shot.

Breakfast was late the following morning, but just as good. The killing of Ivor Lindgrad rated a page-one article in the paper, complete with a picture of the body bag being removed from Le Jules Verne. "The woman reporter lied to you," Leila told Rand. "She did take a picture with her cell phone."

He looked at the paper and shrugged. "I suppose I would have done the same thing." ●

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Sprinkle on a Memory

by Dean Wesley Smith

Red sugar sparkles on white cookie icing.

Blood drops on a snowdrift.

Who would have thought that decorating Christmas cookies with my kid would remind me of a murder? A murder I had no real memory of doing, yet I had no doubt I had done.

I could bring back a few details. The feel of the cold night air, the white of the snow under the light from my car's headlights, and the smell of hot blood from the woman's cut throat. I have a memory of her blood spraying, just as all my victims' blood did. Her blood had left red dots all over the snowbank. Why hadn't I remembered her, or that night, or the blood on the snow before now?

Had I killed too many? Or maybe she was one I had yet to kill.

"You all right, Dad?" my daughter, Jennifer, asked.

My mind snapped out of the vision, or the memory, and came back to the kitchen table. The brightly lit room smelled of baking cookies and felt too warm by a few degrees.

I was sitting at our tablecloth-covered oak table, across from Jennifer. My wife, Lisa, was taking another batch out of the oven. Decorating cookies had been a tradition in our family since before Jennifer was born. I always enjoyed it. It made it feel like the Christmas season.

I had my hand poised over a cookie, the few bits of red sprinkles still in my hand, the rest on the white icing.

Like blood drops on snow.

"Changed my mind," I said, smiling at Jennifer. "I think this one needs green."

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Dean Wesley Smith is the author of more than seventy novels, most of which are either mainstream fiction or in the genres of science fiction and fantasy. He employs several pseudonyms, especially for the books written together with his wife, Kristine Kathryn Rusch. Mr. Smith's most recent work under his own name is an action/adventure entitled *Hard Rain* (Pocket Books); his most recent mystery is *Bump and Run*, under the pen name Edward Taft.

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"You're strange, Dad," Jennifer said, laughing and shaking her head before going back to work on getting the exact right color on an angel cookie.

Lisa laughed too, but it was a fond laugh. For some reason she loved me and all my quirks. Why such a beautiful, brown-haired, brown-eyed, smart woman would love me, I had no idea. But I was very glad she did.

Neither she nor Jennifer had any idea about my little hobby, as I thought of my killing. Everyone in the city, I was sure, had heard of me. I was what the newspapers and police called "The Foothills Slasher." I got the nickname because I always dumped my victims up in the foothills above the city of Boise.

I picked up the bottle of green sugar sparkles and started to put them on the half-decorated cookie. But again the red specks on the white frosting distracted me, brought back a memory I clearly had been holding back for a long time.

Blood splatters on the snow.

I remembered the woman now. It was my first kill, my first wife, actually, long before Lisa.

Her name was Stephanie, and we had met in college. She had been tall, blond, with green eyes. Everything about her shouted sex, and I remember liking that about her most.

For some reason Stephanie and I had been arguing the night I killed her. The police had never found her body, and never would. I had buried her up in the Boise National Forest, deep, very deep, and then killed our dog Harvey and buried him two feet above her, so anyone digging would find the dog bones and stop.

Since she had no parents or close family, I told friends she had taken Harvey and left me for New York City. She had always talked about going to New York to try to break into acting, and every friend we had knew that we fought all the time. So her leaving me was no surprise to anyone.

I acted upset, angry, then upset again.

Everyone bought my little hurt-husband charade. And after some time had passed, I got a divorce and people stopped asking about her.

That was more than twenty years and thirty-five other kills ago. And not once during that time had anyone even questioned me about any of the deaths. I was that good, and that careful. The Foothills Slasher had the police stumped.

Now I was happily married, had a wonderful daughter, and taught in a local high school. I was even an assistant coach on the football team. I only killed once or twice a year, always in the private storage building near the river that I had bought to store sports equipment.

Only Stephanie had been killed out in the open, where I couldn't

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control every detail. In the storage building, I controlled the details, controlled the mess, even had a shower to wash up in, along with a washer and dryer to clean my clothes. With gloves and hot water I washed down every woman I killed, then stood them up to dry. I always left them nude, never left any trace of myself on them, and dumped them by keeping my van on the pavement of a well-traveled road in the foothills.

I also changed vans every year.

So why now, sitting in my kitchen, was seeing red specks on a cookie taking me back to the memory of that first murder? I hadn't thought of Stephanie for a decade.

Suddenly, around the cookie, I could feel the wonderful kitchen, the image of Lisa, slipping away. I tried to hold on to it, but I couldn't.

The fresh smell of baking cookies was still around me, but now instead of a covered oak dining table, I was sitting at a Formica kitchen table. The room around me was smaller, clearly less expensive.

"Jason?" my wife asked, glaring at me from across the room. "Are you all right?"

I glanced up into Stephanie's face, the face of the woman I had thought about killing for twenty years.

"Fine," I said. "Just daydreaming."

Stephanie snorted and shook her head, clearly disgusted. "Wow, that's a surprise."

She always complained that I never seemed to be there, never talked to her, never wanted to touch her anymore. The truth was, she was right. I was always off daydreaming, imagining a life where she didn't exist.

I glanced around, wondering what had happened to me. How had I become this weak person?

I had the dream of Lisa and Jennifer, yet I knew that in reality Stephanie and I had gotten married right out of college and had two children, one named Craig and one named Leslie. Both kids were now off at college and would be coming home in the next day or so. Stephanie had wanted us to decorate cookies as we always did, so the kids would have some.

"Make it feel like Christmas," she had said.

I had agreed, because it was just easier to agree with Stephanie than fight her. I had learned that long ago.

The cookie in front of me had white frosting with red sparkles, just as I imagined the snow would look after I cut Stephanie's neck. For twenty years I had imagined killing Stephanie, imagined having my dream job of teaching high school.

I had imagined killing dozens of other women I had met in my

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corporate job, too, women like Stephanie who deserved to be killed and hung naked to dry.

But I didn't act, I only dreamed.

That was the story of my life, it seemed. I dreamed while doing nothing. And by doing nothing, I got nowhere. I agreed with my wife, worked my boring job, and came home to the same old bitching. Somehow I had lost the person I might have become.

All I had left was my daydreams.

I stared at the white icing on the cookie, letting the red specks become something besides sugar as I imagined slicing Stephanie's throat, letting her blood spurt out over the snow.

"Jason," Lisa said, putting her hand on my shoulder. "Can I get you something?"

"Yeah, Dad, take a break," Jennifer said. "You're acting even stranger than normal."

The vision of killing all those other women was there again.

"I'm fine," I said. I glanced up at my beautiful Lisa. "Honest. I was just thinking how lucky I am to be here with you two."

"Oh, weird," Jennifer said.

Lisa laughed and kissed me. "I'm glad you're here, too." She gave me a wonderful hug, then went to get another batch of cookies out of the oven.

I looked around the kitchen, at my perfect family, at the wonderful, rich-textured room filled with the smell of fresh-baked sugar cookies. I had made a life for myself with Lisa. Not Stephanie. And it was in this life that I wanted to live.

I stared at the cookie with the red sprinkles, remembering how wonderful it had felt to cut Stephanie's neck and watch the blood spray.

Then I took another cookie, put white frosting on it, and again put red sprinkles on it, just to remind myself how lucky I was. ●

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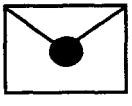

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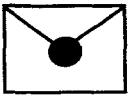

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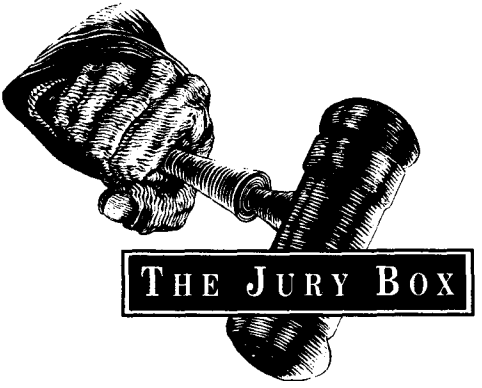

by Jon L. Breen

I would bet that more than half the new mysteries in the current market take place in times other than the present, especially if you count books set in the late 20th century, which given the dizzying pace of change read like historical novels. Consider the following examples from a variety of times and places.

**** Lee Child: *The Enemy,* Delacorte, $25. Military Police Major Jack Reacher is not quite celebrating the new year of 1990, having been abruptly transferred from the action in Panama to a backwater posting in North Carolina. Aided by a young female lieutenant, he covers ground from Paris to California in a career-threatening effort to connect a series of murders that certain fellow officers want left alone. Child has a narrative knack comparable to Donald Hamilton or Adam Hall, and his complex hero offers much to ponder about the limits of duty and honor.

*** Walter Mosley: *Little Scarlet,* Little, Brown, $24.95. Another hero who does his good deeds in unconventional ways is unofficial L.A. private eye Easy Rawlins, who finds himself in a surprising role in the aftermath of the 1965 Watts riots: working with the police to solve a young woman's murder and avert further violence in the black community. The subsequent search for a serial killer is minor as detection but major as a view of the African-American experience. (Reference to a 77th Precinct, in a city that has never designated its police units that way, is especially unfortunate in a book that otherwise exudes authenticity.)

*** Gillian Linscott: *Blood on the Wood,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $24.95. Nell Bray, pre-World-War-I English suffragette, again encounters murder when a valuable painting willed to the cause has been replaced by an obvious fake, and the tangled relationships of the donor's family complicate her efforts to burgle back the original. Linscott deftly balances political/social concerns, well-realized characters (includ-

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ing a music researcher who recalls the Michael Redgrave character in the film *The Lady Vanishes*), and a tantalizing puzzle.

*** Max Allan Collins: *Road to Purgatory,* Morrow, $24.95. This fine blood-drenched account of events before and after the action of *Road to Perdition* ranges from Bataan, the Philippines, in 1942, where Michael Satariano (né O'Sullivan) loses an eye in battle and earns a Congressional Medal of Honor, to Chicago in 1942 and 1943, where he goes undercover in the mob at the behest of Eliot Ness, to the Tri-Cities in 1922 and more O'Sullivan family history. Collins's customary bibliographic essay specifies what's real and what invented.

*** Peter Tremayne: *The Haunted Abbot,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $24.95. In December 666, Irish advocate Sister Fidelma and her Watson/lover Eadulf visit Aldred's Abbey in East Anglia, where Fidelma is accused of witchcraft by the pernicious abbot, plagued by the ghost of his late wife. This is a solid product in every respect, with impeccable scholarship (a six-page historical introduction and four-page pronunciation guide!), compelling narrative drive, details of law and ritual, including a seventh-century Christmas celebration, and real detection, with a fair-play clue to the main secret.

*** Peter Tremayne: *Whispers of the Dead,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $14.95. Sister Fidelma is equally accomplished in shorter cases. Of these 15, three are new, one is from *EQMM,* two from the Fidelma fanzine *The Brehon,* and the rest from original anthologies.

*** Michael Jecks: *The Tolls of Death,* Headline, $24.95. In 1323, weary travelers Sir Baldwin Furnshill and Simon Puttock, en route home to Devon, investigate the death of a young woman and her two children in Cornwall. Typical of the series, the novel is neatly plotted, rich in detail, and long-winded without being padded. Rivaling Tremayne for scholarly precision, Jecks includes a five-page bibliographic introduction.

** Laura Wilson: *Telling Lies to Alice,* Delacorte, $22.95. In 1970s England, former key-club bunny Alice Conway, whose long-term affair with half of a famous TV comedy team ended in his suicide, is menaced six years later by anonymous newspaper clippings and an unexpected visit to her remote farm by the surviving partner. Though promising in its early pages, this pure suspense exercise loses impetus in the second half and ultimately disappoints, especially given the author's excellent previous work. Fans of British comedy will enjoy the allusions to past performers.

** Stuart Woods: *The Prince of Beverly Hills,* Putnam, $25.95. In 1939, Hollywood patrolman Rick Barron helps a star escape the scene of a fatal traffic accident and is offered a job as studio security chief. The background is well researched and the interrelationships of the cops, the movie industry, and organized crime are interestingly explored. But incessant padding, trite and fla-

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vorless dialogue, and carelessness in the naming of characters (for no apparent reason, a Barron and a Barrow plus two Eddies) make me scratch my head over Woods's bestseller status.

** Elizabeth Foxwell, editor: *The Sunken Sailor,* Berkley, $22.95. Simon Brett begins this multi-author homage to the Detection Club's 1931 classic *The Floating Admiral* beautifully, introducing a colorful cast of characters at an English country house party between World Wars and finishing chapter one with the fishpond murder of an annoying American admiral. The next seven contributors—Sharan Newman, Francine Mathews, Walter Satterthwait, Margaret Coel, Carolyn Hart, Carolyn Wheat, and Dorothy Cannell—follow his lead, adding not-too-outrageous plot complications while balancing a straight-faced period style with satirical touches. But beginning in chapter nine and accelerating in chapter ten, things become progressively sillier and more strained. Best avoided by anyone who values Golden Age detection.

Of the 20 all-new stories in the latest MWA anthology, *Show Business Is Murder* (Berkley, $23.95), edited by Stuart M. Kaminsky, at least five fit our historical theme. Three evoke the Hollywood blacklist period: Carolyn Wheat's excellent "Small Time in His Heart," about habitués of a New York movie revival house in 1972, is among other things a moving tribute to friendship and the film musical; Bob Shayne's "The Search for Robert Rich" introduces Brooklyn P.I. Naomi Weinstein, summoned to 1957 Hollywood to find out the identity of a pseudonymous Oscar-winning screen writer, in an engaging retelling of some shameful movieland history; and Steve Hockensmith's "Fred Menace, Commie for Hire" is an amusing parody told by an unlikely P.I. in 1951 Los Angeles. Libby Fischer Hellmann's "A Berlin Story" finds a chilling solution to its 1932 cabaret murder in 1956 New York. Editor Kaminsky's "Break a Leg," a murder comedy of vaudeville days in Chicago, has it moments but includes a jarring anachronism: Amos and Andy in 1924?

Bibliographic note on the EQ centenary: The Queen team would make a great subject for a major biography, but to date none exists. The three best sources of information are the superb critical study *Royal Bloodline: Author and Detective* by Francis M. Nevins (Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1974); *The Sound of Detection: Ellery Queen's Adventures in Radio* (2nd edition, OTR Publishing, 2002) by Nevins and Martin Grams, Jr., which adds general information on the team in addition to chronicling their radio career; and Queen's *The Tragedy of Errors* (Crippen & Landru, 1999), which pairs the first publication of Dannay's outline for a never-completed Queen novel with uncollected short stories, but over half of which is devoted to essays and remembrances of the EQ team by friends, family, and professional associates.

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Art by Ron Buccalo

A Bigfoot Christmas

by James Powell

Winters were a quiet time for Acting Sergeant Maynard Bullock of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The flowerbeds he patrolled on Parliament Hill, posing for tourists' cameras, lay frozen now, and his sidekick Winnie-the-Peg, the bear with the wooden leg, scarlet tunic, and Stetson, with whom he often appeared on television supporting one good cause or another, had gone into hibernation. So come mid December Bullock put in for some well-deserved leave. Yesterday he washed down the kitchen cabinets. Today he would paint them as a surprise for good old Mavis, his wife, who was away in Toronto visiting her mother.

Now as he sat over coffee and his morning stack of toast, Bullock opened the newspaper to find this headline: "FREAK ACCIDENT KILLS SANTA." "John 'Connie' Constable, a Santa at the Bay Department Store," he read in astonishment, "was killed yesterday during the installation of a giant papier-mâché shoe for the 'There Was an Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe' exhibit in Santa's Throne Room. A winch cable broke, sending the toe end of the shoe down

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onto Constable. It then swung back and forth in a small arc, snuffing out his life like a cigarette butt." How ironic, thought Bullock, his old friend killed by a giant shoe.

He and Connie had started at the Mountie Academy together over twenty-five years ago. But in the middle of their first year the top brass realized that when he graduated Connie would be Constable Constable, which might make the force the object of mirth. So Connie had been dismissed.

Soon after, Bullock's friend passed the Civil Service exam. Waiting for his first posting with External Affairs, he'd worked as a department-store Santa. From then on, no matter where in the world he was, Connie always managed to get two weeks' vacation at Christmastime and returned to his Santa job. He claimed that seeing the kids' eyes light up when he *ho-ho-ho*ed was vacation enough. But Bullock suspected the scarlet tunic was the real draw.

James Powell's bungling but beloved Bullock is back for another Christmas adventure, this one involving, of all things, the "Bigfoot," a creature of the same ilk as the Abominable Snowman of lore. Among the elements of the story relating to big feet is a reference to a real bull of Pope Paul II, who cursed all shoemakers who made "peaks" to shoes of more than two inches because their length made it difficult to kneel at prayer. In medieval pictures the devil is often so shod. ¶

He thought of their last get-together a mere three days before, when Connie had taken him to the Butterfly and Wheel, an Ottawa bar in the English-pub style. Outside the snow was falling. In a corner near a side door, two codgers in rocking chairs played cribbage by the crackling fireplace. The bar was freshly decorated for Christmas. So was Constable, who wore the full Santa regalia except for the beard and moustache, which, for ease in beer drinking, he had pulled down under his chin, giving him the appearance of an overdressed billy goat.

Bullock had just called attention to the scene outside the window. Winter had turned the Rideau Canal, which slanted through the heart of the city's downtown, into an ice rink fifteen kilometers long crowded with skaters of all ages in bright winter gear. "A frozen cameo of Canada," said Bullock proudly. "We laugh in the face of winter."

But patriotic rhetoric wasn't going to distract Connie. He repeated what he had just said, his beard trembling earnestly. "Christmas, Bullock, Christmas. What better time for a surprise attack? One, they'd catch us off our guard. Two, it's a holiday they've never much cared for, them not being able to hang their

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stockings from the mantelpiece."

Bullock rolled his eyes heavenward. Once Connie got on the Bigfoot you could never get him off. His first posting abroad had been Ulan Bator in Mongolia. This may have sparked his interest in the Bigfoot and their ilk, the Yeti and the Abominable Snowman, who, some say, were the famous Lost Tribes of Canada, members of the Sasquash nation after whom the province of Saskatchewan is named, who had migrated across the Siberian land bridge to Asia and into Europe thousands of years ago. (Once from Canberra, Australia, he sent Bullock a handbill advertising the Billabong Brothers' Circus with one act circled in red: Joey-Joey, the Kangaroo-Footed Boy. Another time from Rome it was a postcard with a picture of Donatello's bust of Pope Paul II, who, according to the printed information on the back, had issued a bull in 1469 banishing from Christendom those whose feet were so long they could not kneel to pray. Connie's message: "Having a wonderful time. Wish they were here.") Finally Connie's Bigfoot paranoia became so marked that it earned him early medical retirement and he returned to Ottawa to live with his sister.

"You're telling me the Bigfoot are here?" asked Bullock impatiently. "You mean Ottawa?"

"Oh, we've always had the native Bigfoot. But now they're converging on us from all around the world."

"Then, hell's bells, Connie, tell me this: Why haven't I seen any?" demanded Bullock.

"Maybe it's all this drive-in this and drive-in that," said Connie. "And all the cell phones in cars. Believe you me, you've got to keep your eyes peeled. Last October, out for a stroll, I saw one and he didn't see me. He was standing with a rake in the middle of a big pile of leaves and looking around with a gloat in his eye like someday all this will be his. Suddenly he raised this immense six-foot-long foot out of the leaves and gave himself a real good scratch behind the ear with it."

Bullock's snort of disbelief didn't deter Connie. "I've been nosing around," he added. "Got enough stuff to blow the whistle on them. I brought you here because it's one of their hangouts."

Before Bullock could snort again, Connie explained, "The wall-to-wall carpet's the giveaway. They call it 'On-the-Town Brown.'"

An erect man with a trim moustache, bushy eyebrows, and a green and white wool cap with a Toronto Maple Leafs logo had entered by the side door and joined the cribbage players. Before he sat down he gave Bullock and Connie a careful once-over.

"That's a Bigfoot bigwig," whispered Connie, who had quickly slipped his Santa beard back in place. "Watch this," he added. "Keep an eye on the cribbage players." He went over to the juke-

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box and punched in a selection. After a solemn drum roll a military band struck up "Oh, My Darling Clementine."

The two card players jumped to attention and stood with their hands over their hearts. The new arrival spoke to them sharply before shooing the pair ahead of him toward the side door. All three milled about for a minute before going outside. (Were they putting on their galoshes? wondered Bullock, who couldn't see because of the tables.)

With the record still playing, Connie came back, sat down, and pulled his beard down under his chin again. "Light she was and like a fairy, and her shoes were number nine. Herring boxes without topses, sandals were for Clementine."

"I know the words," said Bullock. "You and I sang them enough times around the bonfire at the Academy. So Clementine has big feet. So what?"

"So she's Queen of the Bigfoot, that's what. They thought she was lost and gone forever and they were dreadful sorry about that. Now she's come back to lead them in battle."

"But what the heck's this got to do with Canada? It's about the California gold rush in eighteen forty-nine."

Connie shook his head. "I think not. Try southern Saskatchewan. On the border. She was born near the Forty-Ninth Parallel. Her father was excavating a mine there in Cavern Canyon."

"And is there such a place?" demanded Bullock. He must have hit a weak link in Connie's theory, for his friend looked away. Bullock pressed his advantage. "Look, Connie, remember how she drove her ducklings to the water every morning just at nine?"

"Sure," said his friend. "That's where she hit her foot on a splinter and fell into the river."

Bullock wagged a scolding finger. " 'Into the foaming brine,' " he quoted. "Salt water. And that puts us right back on the California coast." Connie looked so crestfallen Bullock gave him a consoling slap on the arm. "Hey, you can't win them all," he said. "Well, time to make tracks."

As they left the Butterfly and Wheel Bullock glanced over to where the cribbage players had been sitting. There were no rockers, just a table and a cribbage board. Connie saw his puzzled look. "The Bigfoot find it relaxing to arch their feet and rock back and forth on them," he explained.

Bullock snorted.

Outside, as they went their separate ways, Bullock noticed the guy in the Maple Leafs cap across the street watching them from behind a knee-high rampart of snow.

When Bullock called Connie's sister to offer condolences, she told

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him the funeral would be the next afternoon. He promised to be there. Then he got back to painting the kitchen. Good old Mavis had been fond of Connie and would regret missing the funeral. But he didn't expect her back until Christmas Eve, the day after tomorrow. She never missed the Debutantes' Ball, Ottawa's winter social-season opener when all the young women entering society were presented to Her Excellency Mrs. Bowes-Bouchard, Canada's first Governor-General of both American Indian and East Indian extraction.

This year the Ice Palace where the Debutantes' Ball would be held was in the Oriental style of Brighton's Royal Pavilion. The Mountie Academy cadets who built it with their chainsaws had interspersed the blocks of river ice with artificial ones, colored bright reds, golds, and blues. Lit from inside, the Ice Palace shone so brightly that a talking head on CBC-TV declared it more suited to Aladdin's Cave than to a scene of homespun Canadian simplicity.

The Ice Palace would decorate the canal all winter and serve as the centerpiece of February's Winterlude festivities, when the frozen canal hosted sulky, dogsled, and speed-skating races and all-round good, clean outdoor fun.

The Debutantes' Ball was for the ladies, God bless them. But when Bullock dropped good old Mavis off he would head farther down the frozen canal for the annual curling match, where the prime minister and his cabinet took on the leader of the loyal opposition and his shadow cabinet. As a special treat this year, the match would be preceded by a visit from the band of the *I Trampoli,* the Italian regiment that marches in double time on stilts, harkening back to its early years clearing the Pontine marshes near Rome of *banditti.* There would also be a display of synchronized dogsled maneuvers by one of Canada's most famous regiments, the Queen's Own Sledded Foot.

As Bullock stirred the paint pot he reflected on the changes he'd seen on the force over the years. Yes, the Mounties were out of sled work now. The Queen's Own Sledded Foot guarded the vast Canadian northland from enemy attack. Bullock smiled, remembering a game the Mounties used to play crowded around an open fire on the trail or smoking their pipes on the porch of some lonely outpost. Overhead swung the constellation Orion with the dribble of stars down his pant leg. In the game he became Sergeant O'Ryan of the RCMP and the six brightest stars strung out ahead of him were his dog team. Mounties vied to name the perfect team. Bullock remembered how fancy-Dan the lead-dog names could get, like Snow Strider, Wind Runner, Load Star, Master of the Storm, and Tundra Momma. In his heart, Bullock had named his lead dog

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Little Trotty Tugwell. But he never told the others, knowing it would get a big horselaugh.

A slanting snow was falling the afternoon of the graveside service. Bullock stood at the curb in front of his house in boots and breeks, short winter-issue coyote-fur jacket and Stetson, for he believed his friend's heart had remained with the Mounties. Connie's sister had offered to pick him up in the undertaker's limousine on the way to the cemetery. She always seemed to him to be a level-headed type. Small, with short gray hair and a smoky voice, she had risen from the Ministry of Justice secretarial pool to a minor official capacity from which she was now retired.

Getting into the limousine with her, Bullock discovered a large cardboard box on the seat between them. "Here's Connie's Bigfoot stuff," she explained. "I'd like you to have it. Like a memento. I get the heebie-jeebies just having it in the house. I loved my brother. But on that subject he was crazy as a bedbug."

She shook her head and gave a sad laugh. "A few years back I told him flat out I didn't believe in the Bigfoot. Well, he smiled and said, 'Dollars to donuts you're working alongside one right now. You know, the eager beaver who's already at his desk when you get there in the morning and never takes a coffee break or hangs around the water cooler, the one who's still there plugging away when you and the others head for home.' "

She dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief wrapped in her fingers. "Well, he had me there," she said, "about the eager beavers, I mean. Back then every office had a couple. But it never got them anywhere, promotion-wise. The Civil Service is big on conviviality, how you handle yourself at the water cooler or over drinks." She cocked her head. "Funny how the eager beavers went out about the same time the wall-to-wall came in."

Bullock knew what she meant. Some ten years before, the member from Saskatchewan accused the prime minister of sweeping scandals under the rug. To prevent a recurrence, he proposed installing wall-to-wall carpet in Parliament and the adjacent government office buildings. And so it was ruled.

For Bullock, Parliament, the Governor-General who represented the Queen, God bless her, and the Civil Service, that fine bureaucracy whose convivial competence kept the government humming like a well-oiled machine, were the three pillars on which Canada rested. Knock out any two of these pillars and the country would still stand, true, north, strong, and free.

The cemetery was a vast white landscape studded with snow-covered tombstones and monuments, Connie's grave a black gash in the ground surrounded by sections of artificial grass. The

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memorial service was windswept and mercifully brief. At the end Bullock gave his old friend one of his snappiest salutes.

Then, as he turned to get back into the limousine, he noted, several plots over, an excavation vehicle had broken the frozen earth to dig another grave. A bareheaded workman was standing in the hole up to his neck. Apparently he had been clearing out the broken clods of frozen earth but stopped out of respect for the dead when the funeral cortege arrived. Now he pulled on a Maple Leafs cap and turned his head to match Bullock's stare, stroking his moustache thoughtfully.

When Bullock got back home he took the cardboard box up to his office, as he now called the guest room where someday he hoped to write his autobiography, *That Man in Scarlet: The Reminiscences of Commissioner Maynard Bullock, RCMP (Ret.),* and set it down on the card table, meaning to change out of his uniform and get back to painting. But curiosity made him look inside. The first thing he came to was a book from the Ottawa Public Library titled *Canada and the Bigfoot Agenda.* Connie had used a Billabong Circus flier to mark a place and underlined the following passage in pencil: "Some say the Bigfoot has become extinct like the dodo. I say he may still prowl in Abyssinian forests, range still over Asiatic steppes, and lope the Arctic tundra far from the eyes of man. We may not see him. But he is watching us. How it must rot his immense socks to see what we have done to the land we have taken from him. Please God, may he never find a way to walk among us. If he ever does, Canada could well get a giant kick in the slats that might well prove our undoing. Then we would find ourselves the ones who are on the outside looking in."

Bullock turned to the back of the book and discovered it had already been three days overdue the day Connie died. He thought for a moment before shaking his head. No, librarians wouldn't kill a man for that.

The phone rang. Connie's sister had arrived home to find her house broken into. Every dresser drawer in her brother's second-floor bedroom had been dumped out onto the floor and the mattress on the bed turned over. "The police just left," she said. "Can you come over? I've got something to show you, something I just couldn't show them."

When he got there Connie's sister led Bullock around to the side of the house, pointing out the marks of the intruder's skis and ski poles coming and going across the lawn. Then she stopped under her brother's window. "The police couldn't figure how he could get in without a ladder. Here's what I wanted to show you." She pointed out two partial footprints on the first-floor window ledge. "My late-departed brother always insisted a full-grown Bigfoot

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standing on tiptoe on a first-floor window ledge could look through a second-floor window."

Before Bullock could snort she added, "Oh, by the way, leaving for work the day he was killed, my brother asked me to remind him to call you when he got home. Something about Salt Springs, Saskatchewan."

The snow ended and evening brought a new weather front with thunder and the dim pulse of sheet lightning. Still wearing his scarlet tunic and boots, Bullock sat deep in thought at the guest-room card table, a half-eaten cheese sandwich curling at his elbow. Before him on the table was his atlas and the magnifying glass he'd used to follow the Forty-Ninth Parallel across Saskatchewan until he came to Salt Springs at the juncture of the Big Moccasin and the Little Moccasin rivers.

Then he'd gone through the rest of Connie's box, piling its contents on the table. First came a glossy stock prospectus for a company called Saskatoon Carpet and Sleeve. The name rang a bell. Hadn't they won the contract to wall-to-wall the Parliament buildings with their Civil Service Beige, as elegant a beige as you could find anywhere? Subsequently, the literature boasted, the same carpet had been introduced onto all Air Canada passenger flights, foreign and domestic. The prospectus also showed the company's other carpets: Snow White, Pavement Gray, Red-Carpet Red, Grassy Green, and On-the-Town Brown.

This was followed by a newspaper clipping describing the tragic event of three years before when Canada's senior civil servants, on their annual holiday outing to Niagara Falls, had vanished during a trip on the *Maid of the Mist.* The ferry entered the fog beneath the Canadian Falls and when it reappeared an hour later, all the passengers, the crew, and the military band on board to provide music for the occasion had disappeared without a trace. By Godfrey, mused Bullock, what a giant step forward that must have been for the middle ranks of the Canadian Civil Service.

Were the senior civil servants dead, as some said, or had they moved to the States, lured by Washington's high salaries for seasoned bureaucrats? This last would certainly explain all the plastic raincoats with *"Maid of the Mist"* printed on the back that pop up on rainy days around the Capitol.

But by far the most puzzling things Bullock found were at the bottom of the box: two six-foot-long tubes of Civil Service Beige closed at one end and open and bound with elastic at the other. He looked inside each in turn. Nothing. He held the openings to his nose. They smelled of foot. Bullock sat staring thoughtfully ahead, trying to put the pieces of this complicated puzzle together. At last

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he slipped the tubes on the ends of his boots and wagged them in the air.

As he did a flash of sheet lightning illuminated a face in the window. In an instant the window was dark again. But Bullock would never forget the malice of those eyes glaring in at him from beneath the Maple Leafs cap. When the lightning came again the window was empty.

Bullock ripped off the carpet tubes and pounded down the stairs, grabbed his fur jacket and Stetson, and was out the door. He followed the marks of a cross-country skier across the lawn and out into the street. The lightning flashed again just in time to illuminate his man as he disappeared around a far corner. Bullock set out after him though he knew his chances of catching up with a man on skis were slim.

He followed the tracks down a ramp to the snow-covered surface of the Rideau Canal, where they blended in with many other ski tracks. Had his man headed downtown or out toward the suburbs? As Bullock stood there indecisively, a familiar sound came to him across the ice: the bells of the old horse-drawn sleigh used by the Mountie glee club, the Stout-Hearted Men, for their tunesome entry in the Winterlude festivities. The sleigh was heading back to the RCMP stables downtown after a glee-club rehearsal. Bullock flagged it down with his Stetson.

No, said the driver, no skier in a Maple Leafs cap had passed him heading out of town.

Pleased with his luck, Bullock swung up onto the sleigh and told the man to pick up the pace. Soon Bullock's quarry came in view. When the man herringboned up an off-ramp Bullock jumped down and followed close behind. After several snowy blocks the man turned off into a narrow alley and disappeared, skis and all, through a back door illuminated by a bare light bulb on a goose-neck mounting.

Bullock tried the door but it was locked. As he stared up at the building several dogs started barking nearby. Turning back the way he'd come, Bullock stumbled over something under the snow. Then he stumbled again and would have lost his balance if someone hadn't reached out and grabbed two fistfuls of fur lapels to steady him. "G'die, mate," came an Australian voice. "What you sniffing around for?"

Bullock, struggling unsuccessfully to shake himself loose, decided to take the man down a peg. "I'm Acting Sergeant Maynard Bullock of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police," he said.

"Hell if you ain't, mate," said the man, shifting his weight to one foot. As he did, an accomplice must have sneaked up behind Bullock and hit him across the side of the head with something very hard and cold.

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Bullock regained consciousness sitting on a floor with a pillowcase over his head, his back against a wall, tied by his wrists to a small radiator. Deciding he was alone, he leaned against the radiator and worked the pillowcase up so he could get his teeth at the knots. Square knots and tightly made. Your bad guy never used grannies, depend on that. Under cover of the pillowcase Bullock began to chew. The trick was to chew off small pieces and spit them out. Otherwise, warned the Mountie Academy escape-techniques instructor in his only joke for the course, you'll get bound up. Bullock chewed until he heard voices coming. Then he pretended he was still unconscious.

"Maybe I should've tied him in a chair, sir," said the Australian. "Handier for slapping him around to find out what he knows."

Another voice laughed. "We know exactly what he knows, Joey-Joey. He knows everything. He's gone through the box. He'd have to be a bloody fool not to put two and two together."

Bullock wondered if the man was talking about the same box.

"Then should I kill him, sir?"

"What's the hurry? After tomorrow we'll be the law of the land and can execute any Teensy-Toes we want. Now, go alert our security people. I'll keep an eye on Bullock here. Then you and I will go over to his place, get the box, and we'll be home free."

Joey-Joey left the room. His superior remained there whistling tunelessly and turning the pages of a magazine until a telephone rang in another room and he went to answer it.

Bullock ripped the shredded rope apart and tore off the pillowcase. He paused to get the lay of the land. He was in a small anteroom furnished with wooden armchairs and a coffee table strewn with issues of *Mega-Savate* magazine, whatever that was. Through a partially opened door he saw the man in the Maple Leafs cap standing behind a desk shouting into the phone.

Bullock dashed into the hall and down a wide staircase leading to the first floor. At the bottom he didn't know which way to go. Then he heard the dogs barking again. He ran down the hallway toward the sound. He saw a door, turned the knob, and was out in the snow again under the gooseneck light fixture. A voice inside his head said, "Run like the wind, Bullock."

Bullock left his house with Connie's box, got into the waiting taxi, and drove to Mountie headquarters to see Inspector Marcel Nickerson of the Mountie Lunatic Fringe desk, who was Christmas duty officer that year. Bullock had a bit of a reputation as a teller of tall tales. Only Nickerson would give him a fair listen. Maybe the man could make some sense out of the contents of the box.

But as luck would have it, the inspector was over at the Ice

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Palace. The CSIS, the Canadian Special Intelligence Service, suspected a glass bomb filled with transparent explosives had been placed somewhere among the blocks of ice. (As a cynical talking head on CBC-TV recently remarked, "George Orwell had Big Brother. Canada's got Big CSIS.") Nickerson wasn't expected back for an hour.

Something told Bullock Canada was in danger. But he wished he had a better handle on it than that. To get his thoughts together before he saw Nickerson, Bullock went across the street to the coffee shop. He sat at the counter with the box on the stool next to him. Waiting for his coffee, he flipped absently through the selections in the little jukebox menu at his place. There was "Oh, My Darling Clementine" again. And hey, look at this, played by the band of the Queen's Own Sledded Foot! Cocking a thoughtful eyebrow, Bullock dug out the *Maid of the Mist* clipping. Yes, it was the same band that vanished with the senior civil servants. Maybe that fine old military unit would have a few of the missing pieces to help him put the puzzle together. Bullock paid for his coffee and took up the box. The regimental association's headquarters was not far away.

Pleased with himself, Bullock mounted the steps to the building two at a time and rang the doorbell. As he did, dogs began to bark. "G'die again, mate," said Joey-Joey, opening the door and grabbing Bullock by both lapels. The next thing Bullock knew, the man's damned accomplice sneaked up from behind and clubbed him alongside the head again.

When Bullock came to, he was tied securely to a wooden armchair, his legs to its front legs, his arms to its arms. And the pillowcase was back over his head. Been here. Done this. Got the T-shirt, he told himself. No, it wasn't the first time he'd been in this predicament.

"We've got man and box now, Joey-Joey," said the voice of the man in the Maple Leafs cap. "Tomorrow is Teensy-Toes' Armageddon day."

"Yes, sir," said Joey-Joey.

The other voice changed to a gentle scolding tone. "And, hey, didn't I tell you to call me Abe?"

"I can't call you that, sir. You've never been abominable to me."

"Yes, Abominable's a hard label, isn't it? Oh, I'll admit I can get a bit testy and don't suffer fools gladly. But if the Teensy-Toes want Abominable, I'll give it to them."

"And if anything goes wrong, sir, there's always Plan B," said Joey-Joey.

"I wish the hell there wasn't," growled Abe. "This is my country. Our kind were here first. Let the Teensy-Toes go back where they came from. And good riddance. But come on, we've got a lot to do.

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We can leave him here. You sure know your knots. I'd like to see him get out of that."

When they were gone Bullock quickly grabbed a large mouthful of pillowcase in his teeth and pulled down until it fell to the floor. Bullock had been tied to so many chairs he always entered the six-legged race, come Mountie field days. Racers were of two minds: the clumpers, who held to slow but sure and chugged around the oval and through the obstacle course in small jumps, and the pivoters, who sprinted ahead first on one front leg and then on the other. Then in the back stretch came the great equalizer, Dead Man's Corner, a breakneck flight of wooden steps down to a sand pit beyond which stood the finish line.

Bullock needed a quick start. He sprint-pivoted out of the room and down the empty hallway toward the back stairs. When he reached the staircase he swallowed hard. Halfway down was a landing and another flight of stairs. Landings were hell, with a bounce that was anybody's guess. Bullock heard someone shouting behind him. He thought of Canada, good old Mavis, and his friend Connie. Then he pitched himself forward, reaching the bottom dazed and in a jumble of loose rope, kindling, and aching bones. He staggered to his feet. This time he knew which way to run.

Bullock found Inspector Nickerson standing in front of the Ice Palace waiting for the men of the bomb squad to finish their search. Starting at the very beginning, Bullock told Nickerson about his friend Connie Constable's ideas concerning the Bigfoot, and his death in a freak accident. He described the contents of Connie's box all the way down to the strange six-foot tubes of Civil Servant Beige carpet. He told of the face in his window and his two escapes from the headquarters of the Queen's Own Sledded Foot regimental association.

Inspector Nickerson's expression changed from puzzlement to alarm and finally, when Bullock had finished his story, to a kind of relief. "My God, man," he said admiringly, "you've explained it all, all the strange stories crossing my desk at Lunatic Fringe, little things that I've been catching a glimpse of out of the corner of my eye in the halls on Parliament Hill. And what about that funny walk the new crop of senior civil servants have? I was afraid I was losing my mind. But you've made sense out of it all. We have to nip this vast conspiracy in the bud."

Nickerson began pacing up and down, struggling to formulate the correct plan, shaking his head over this one and rejecting that out of hand. Once he stopped and said, "Of course we'll have to swear everyone to secrecy." Then he went back to his pacing.

Bullock waited there on the ice, his feet getting colder by the minute. Finally he said, "Sir, if you don't have anything more for

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me here, I'll head home. Maybe I'll see you tomorrow at the curling after I drop my wife off at the Debutantes' Ball."

Nickerson looked at him vaguely, deep in thought. Then he blinked. "The Debutantes' Ball? The curling? Brilliant, Bullock, you sly fox. Brilliant. Yes, indeed, you most certainly will see me tomorrow night."

Bullock escorted Mavis as far as the red-carpeted steps of the Ice Palace. Then he hurried off to the floodlit curling rinks. Inspector Nickerson had wrangled him the best seat in the house on the Stout-Hearted Men's horse-drawn sleigh, parked at the edge of the canal next to the six sleek RCMP Zamboni ice-cleaning machines. The ice was decorated with roses, fleurs-de-lis, thistles, and maple leaves disappearing off into the distance, for it is, Bullock knew, in the nature of stencilers to go too far.

The members of Parliament stood in the middle of the canal with their curling stones, waiting for the contest to begin. Now here they came, the *I Trampoli* band, in lofty, stilted magnificence in their long green, red, and white striped trousers, their kettledrums setting a rapid pace. They formed up next to the Stout-Hearted Men to open the ceremony by playing "O Canada" in the quick winter version before their spit valves froze up. But after a long drum-roll introduction the band struck up "Oh, My Darling Clementine" instead. Surprised, the Stout-Hearted Men switched to that popular favorite without missing a beat.

At the end of the song the Queen's Own Sledded Foot emerged from the darkness of the upper canal, coming in single file for their demonstration of precision dogsledding. The regiment began by making a large, fast-moving circle around the curling teams, each soldier grace itself and one with his sled. Now the circle tightened and tightened again until the prime minister and the others had to crowd together to protect their toes from the sled runners. The spectators laughed at this bit of good-natured hijinks.

Suddenly the colonel of the regiment reached out and grabbed the prime minister and threw him across his sled. Simultaneously the other members of the regiment scooped up the cabinet and the loyal opposition. Then the Queen's Own Sledded Foot sped off in single file back into the darkness from which they'd come, the pitiful shouts and cries of the parliamentary leadership vanishing with them. Bullock stood dumbfounded on the sleigh. The second pillar on which the Dominion stood had just been kicked out from under it before his very eyes.

Suddenly the Stout-Hearted Men were cheering. From the direction of the Ice Palace came Canada's gilded Sleigh of State carrying the Governor-General, God bless her, with Inspector Nickerson at the reins. On the bench beside him was a debutante with a

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black eye and the cap of a Mountie of the female persuasion. Inside Bullock could see Her Excellency with three other debutantes in Mountie caps, holding service revolvers to her head. By Godfrey, had the world gone mad?

Bullock jumped down and ran over to the Sleigh of State as it came to a halt. The Governor-General called to him. "You there, Mountie," she commanded, "arrest these people. They want to depose me because I am part American Indian and part East Indian."

Nickerson was at Bullock's side. "Here's the final piece of our puzzle," he said. "I checked it out. Her Excellency here was born Omaha Darjeeling Clementine Snow. She's the daughter of Colonel Abe Snow of the Queen's Own Sledded Foot."

The Governor-General leaned out the carriage window and shouted up at the *I Trampoli,* "Bandsmen, defend your queen!"

The stilted musicians dropped their instruments to draw their weapons. But suddenly with a roar of machinery the Mountie Academy cadets stepped from the darkness armed with chainsaws and surrounded the band. Meanwhile the Zambonis had moved into position behind the Sleigh of State, blocking the canal.

Now in the distance came another roar of engines which Bullock recognized at once: snowmobiles, stinkpots, as he called them contemptuously in his own dogsledding days. The sound grew louder. Now the Queen's Own Sledded Foot reappeared in unmilitary confusion, milling about the Sleigh of State, prevented by the Zambonis from going any farther. Behind them came the snowmobiles of the Mountie crack machine-gun unit, closing the trap.

Inspector Nickerson approached Colonel Snow's sled and pointed back at the man's daughter, the Governor-General, with guns to her head. Bullock could not hear what he said or what Snow said back. But after a moment Snow tipped the prime minister off his sled and held up his hands. His men and the *I Trampoli* band followed suit. The Stout-Hearted Men disarmed the band and the dogsled regiment. Then the Mountie snowmobiles escorted the Queen's Own Sledded Foot away, dogs and all.

That Christmas Eve out there on the Rideau ice the prime minister signed the document to implement the War Powers Act. Later that night Mounties raided Snow's regimental association headquarters, confiscating a list of its friends and sympathizers.

On Christmas Day all across the country Mounties and provincial policemen were knocking on doors. By Boxing Day, crowded RCAF transport helicopters were converging on Salt Springs, Saskatchewan. Nearby, in the heart of Cavern Canyon, a broad mineshaft led southward, an eerie tunnel where hot springs and winter cold combined to create a thick, gray waist-high fog.

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Every ten feet a Mountie stood at attention beneath a dim light bulb caged in the ceiling. Bullock had been given the place of honor beside the broad yellow stripe on the wall marking the border between Canada and the United States. Yes, the Cavern Canyon mineshaft had figured in Colonel Snow's Plan B. If the attempt to kidnap the parliamentary leadership failed, he and his followers would use it to escape to the United States.

And here they came, striding four abreast through the fog, Snow and his regiment, all dressed in civilian clothes and straight as ramrods, marching with the distance of a dogsled between each rank. Bullock couldn't see through the dense fog but he thought perhaps they had been provided handcarts to carry their possessions.

Snow's face was impassive, his stride military. But as he came to the stripe Bullock saw the man's chin tremble and tears start down his cheeks. Then he threw back his shoulders and, as he had sworn to do, led his men past the stripe and into snowy Montana.

The *I Trampoli,* all cut down to size and no doubt pushing their musical instruments on handcarts, followed after them. Friends, sympathizers, and senior civil servants came next, all spaced for handcarts, too. The stripe on the wall had a sobering effect. Even the CBC-TV's talking heads shut up when they saw it.

As Joey-Joey passed, bringing up the rear, he offered a menacing "G'bye, mate," making the Mountie start and look around for the man's club-wielding accomplice.

When the cavalcade had disappeared southward, the demolition people came and wired everything up and cleared the mineshaft. Someone cried, "Fire in the hole!" and depressed the plunger. With a large explosion Cavern Canyon mineshaft vanished from the face of the earth.

Only then did a sealed step van carrying the Governor-General and her ladies-in-waiting cross over the Peace Bridge to Niagara Falls, New York. Later the newspapers would report she had resigned her position to move to the United States, just as they would tell the tragic story of the Queen's Own Sledded Foot perishing to a man on winter maneuvers when unseasonably thin ice, no doubt due to global warming, gave way beneath their sleds.

Later Bullock heard about the Debutantes' Ball from good old Mavis. At the end of "Oh, My Darling Clementine" the Governor-General interrupted the proceedings to read a proclamation from the red-carpeted dais. But before she could speak, four debutantes pulled Mountie caps and pistols from their bodices and shouted that she was under arrest. The Governor-General's ladies-in-waiting rushed forward to her defense and there was a scuffle which only ended when Inspector Nickerson came up from behind

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and put a pistol to the Governor-General's head. Mavis swore she saw a lady-in-waiting grab a Mountie debutante by the front of her dress and all of a sudden a six-foot length of red carpeting rose up and whacked the Mountie alongside her head.

Bullock chuckled with warm condescension. *Et tu,* Mavis? he asked himself. But he couldn't really blame her. Since Christmas Eve Bigfoot stories had been coming thick and fast. Poor old Connie would have loved it. At first Bullock butted in when the young Mounties in the locker room started in on the Bigfoot. "Come to your senses, men," he would snort. "Are you telling me the Queen's Own Sledded Foot didn't have sleds, just runners on their immense feet?" Or he'd scoff and ask, "Are you saying the *I Trampoli* band weren't on stilts but were Bigfoot walking around on tippy-toe?"

But after he laughed to scorn someone's suggestion that the new regulation requiring all visitors to Canada to place their shoes in trays of disinfectant had nothing to do with preventing the spread of hoof-and-mouth disease but was meant to keep the Bigfoot from getting back into the country, he noticed the young Mounties were starting to drift away when they saw him coming. So Bullock stopped mocking their Bigfoot stories. He didn't want to alienate them. He knew it was important they felt free to come to him for advice whenever they wanted.

Bullock's only regret was not investing in Saskatoon Carpet and Sleeve, which had just won contracts to carpet the Mother of All Malls in New Jersey, several state legislatures, and the very Senate of the United States. Yes, Saskatoon's carpet looms were humming and the quick fingers of Canada's youth were plucking their way to prosperity.

There was talk of the Mounties getting back into sled work to fill the northern void the Queen's Own Sledded Foot had left behind. Bullock thought of volunteering, but when he tried to float the idea by good old Mavis, she described in graphic detail exactly how thick hell would have to freeze over before she'd return to the far north.

Bullock never brought the subject up again. But sometimes at night when he turned in for some well-deserved sleep he would close his eyes and let Little Trotty Tugwell pull him into the land of dreams. ●

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Love and Death in Africa

by Joan Richter

Everywhere in Nairobi flowers were in bloom—apricot-colored hibiscus, crimson poinsettia, and cascades of bougainvillea in all colors tumbling over stone walls. But if there were any flowers on the street to which I had come, I did not see them. Everything was gray and forbidding. I veered from thinking of what awaited me inside.

The authorities have no resources to identify the deceased, I was told. They are relieved when someone comes forward to do that for them. The procedure will be quite routine.

The work of any well-known writer will inspire other writers, and the novels of Ellery Queen ignited more careers than we can trace. But it's worth pointing out, on their centenary, that the cousins who wrote as Ellery Queen also had a hands-on role in developing new talent. Fred Dannay taught writing courses and Joan Richter was one of his students. She's published many fine stories such as this one since Dannay discovered and helped to shape her work. ❡

The Thorn Tree was the kind of place where a cold bottle of Tusker or a cup of Kenya's fine brew bought you time to sit back and watch the passing scene. It had been a favorite of mine when my family and I had lived in Nairobi, so that's where I headed my first morning back after five years. I was staying at The New Stanley and the cafe was right out in front.

I chose a table that faced Kimathi Street, with Kenyatta Avenue off to the left. I could see the purple haze of the jacaranda trees that lined the wide boulevard, named after the country's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, an anthropologist educated in Britain. He had been a great leader when he appeared on the scene. He believed in the land and he fought for his people's right to it. A flamboyant figure, he was often seen in public gatherings wearing

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a leopard skin across his chest, and used a fly whisk as his scepter. Flies are major pests throughout Africa. Corruption is another scourge. It would tarnish Kenyatta's legacy.

The cars and trucks moving along the street were not too different from what I remembered—all makes, shapes, sizes, and vintages. Some showed wear, others the shine of freshly applied polish by the owner's house servant. The dusty, mud-caked Land Rovers and carryalls established where I was, in a city surrounded by the bush, vast stretches of rugged, untamed land.

A waiter came to my table. His proud bearing was enough to identify him as Masai, but his earlobes confirmed his tribal origins, long open loops that swung as he walked. In the grasslands where the Masai tended their cattle, it was common to see the stretched skin plugged with a piece of wood, sometimes a flashlight battery. I wondered how he had made his journey from cattle herder to waiter in one of Nairobi's major tourist hotels.

"Good morning, sir. You would like breakfast?"

I returned his greeting with a smile, gave him my order, and watched him move off. He hadn't lost his graceful stride.

As I settled into the shade of the giant thorn tree that gave the cafe its name, I thought of how in earlier times someone I knew would happen by. I couldn't expect that now. Everyone I'd known had left. Even Lisette.

The shops across the street had begun to open and I saw that Woolworth's was no longer there. Not a great loss, Ann would say. My wife had preferred the *dukas* on Bazaar Street, a string of shops and stalls connected to each other by back doors and blood relationships. They were owned by the descendants of immigrants from India and Pakistan, the Asians of East Africa, who had come in the early 1900s to work on the East African Railway, and stayed on.

You could find almost anything on Bazaar Street—cooking pots and spices, hardware, school uniforms, shoes, cottons, fine silks, a good tailor, just for a start. The scent of curry was always in the air. But the *dukas* were gone now, as were their owners. Confirmation of their absence was stark to see. Their faces were missing among the people passing by.

The departure of the British had been underway in my time, the beginning of a major land resettlement program and a somewhat orderly process. It had been prompted by Independence with its promise of returning the land to Kenyans, land the colonizing British had taken as theirs and farmed for decades. But the expulsion of Asians had been a different matter. It was sudden and swift. I was already back in the States when they were forced out, but I'd followed the story in the international press. Headlines told of displaced Asians seeking asylum in England and other parts of the British Commonwealth, but finding themselves unwelcome.

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My breakfast arrived. The aroma of the cheese omelet and sausage told me how hungry I was. I ate with relish and watched the city come to life.

I was dismayed to see that Kenyan women had adopted Western dress. Gone were the *kikoys* and *kangas* they had worn with such grace, bright lengths of colored cloth fashioned into slings for *totos* who rode at their mothers' breasts or on their backs. Westernization was a sign of progress, I supposed, but the change was jarring to my nostalgic eye. More troubling were the number of bedraggled figures in tattered clothes walking aimlessly along.

I thought about Danny and the challenge it would be to tell him about the changes I would find. Though he was only eight when we left Kenya, his recollections remained vivid, reinforced by our slides. Plugging in the projector was always a prompt for retelling old stories. His favorite was taking Musembe to the game park for the first time.

I hadn't forgotten the promise Danny had extracted from me: "You'll try to find Musembe, won't you?" I wasn't surprised by his request, but I had little hope of fulfilling it. Our former house servant had made plans to leave Nairobi and return to his village to farm. I reminded Danny of that.

"He could have changed his mind," my son insisted. "Or he might have come back to Nairobi. He could be working in our old house, for the people who live there now. You could go there and have a look, couldn't you, Dad?"

I ruffled my son's blond hair. "Sure. I can do that."

"That's great, Dad. And if you find him, give him this. There's a picture inside of me in my soccer uniform, and some Kenya shillings Mom had." The small white envelope with Musembe's name on it was in my pocket now.

Prompted by that recollection, my glance returned to the young Kenyan I'd noticed earlier. He was standing next to the newspaper kiosk on the corner of Kenyatta Avenue. He appeared to be waiting for someone. He resembled Musembe. He was about the same height and was dressed in black trousers and white shirt, which is what Musembe wore on his days off when he went into town, shedding his workday suntans. Ann and I had remarked to each other how crisp and smart he looked when we saw him step through the gate of the high bougainvillea hedge that separated the servants' quarters from the main house. His head tilted proudly as he set off across the lawn to the path that led to the lower road, where he could catch a ride into town. If Danny saw him, he ran outside to wave, shouting the Swahili goodbye, *"Kwaheri."*

Musembe always returned his call.

I continued to study the man on the corner, realizing I was bestowing on him a greater resemblance to Danny's friend than

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was really there. It was wishful thinking, I knew. He turned then, and I should have had a clear view of his face, but sunlight flashed off his dark features and transformed them into a shining blur. At the same time, the bright light made his full silhouette clear, and with that, my fantasy collapsed. The sag of the man's shoulders dissolved whatever resemblance might have been there. This was not the posture of the proud man we had known.

I absorbed the disappointment, feeling somewhat foolish, yet for some reason my gaze still held, and in the next moment I was engrossed in watching a progression of gestures I knew I had seen before. In times of stress, Musembe often brought his hand to his forehead, passing it over his head and down the back of his neck. A resigned nod would follow, completed by a skyward glance. *"Shari ya mungu."* His lips moved in a quiet whisper. God's will.

I gripped the edge of my table and rose. I still wasn't certain he was the man I wanted him to be, but I had to make sure. The distance between us wasn't far, but I approached slowly. He glanced at me warily.

"Jambo, Musembe," I said tentatively, but up close all doubt was gone.

He was startled, and no wonder. I had called him by his name. Why should he remember me? After all, it had been five years. Shadows moved over the surface of his eyes. They widened in startled disbelief.

"Bwana!" he exclaimed. *"Bwana* Williams, is that you?"

Words failed me for a moment, but a grin gradually spread across my face. *"Jambo sana,* Musembe. It is good to see you again." I reached to shake his hand, continuing the Swahili greeting. *"Habari gani?"* How are things?

"Nzuri, bwana."

The answer was always the same at first. Good. The details would come later. We stood for a moment, eyeing each other in silent amazement. It was up to me to take it from there.

I explained that I had been having breakfast when I saw him, motioning toward The Thorn Tree and the table where I had been sitting. He must have passed the cafe dozens of times, but he would not have been inside. I asked him to join me, and when we were seated I asked him if he still liked sausage rolls. I had seen them on the menu.

Ann had often bought the tasty savories at a bakery in Westlands. Danny would run to the servants' quarters, clutching the small bakery bag, eager to share his snack with Musembe.

Musembe smiled. "I have not had sausage rolls in a long time, but I like them very much. Danny liked them, too. He must be a big boy now." A shy look came into his eyes. "Does the *Bwana Kidogo* remember me?"

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Little Man, Musembe's special name for Danny. I swallowed hard.

What an unlikely pair they had been, the lean black man and our little boy, running the ball on the back lawn, Danny challenging his sturdy plump legs to imitate Musembe's smooth, elegant moves.

"Oh yes, he remembers you. He has lots of stories about you—his Kenyan friend, who taught him how to play soccer."

"You have not come back to Nairobi to stay," Musembe said quietly, cutting to what was important to him. There was a question in his voice, but I suspected he knew the answer.

"No. I will be here only two weeks, to attend a conference at the university. It begins later this morning." Disappointment shadowed his eyes, but only briefly. It was a matter of pride.

I leaned toward him. "When I told Danny I was coming to Nairobi, he asked me to try to find you. I didn't think you would be in Nairobi." I shook my head and looked toward the kiosk. "But there you were."

I reached into my pocket for the small white envelope. "This is from Danny."

Musembe studied his name on the envelope and opened it slowly. He acknowledged the folded shillings with a serious nod and bent his head to study the photograph. He read the message Danny had printed on the other side.

"These are very good presents, *bwana.* I am happy to know Danny remembers me. Please tell him, *asante sana.*" His eyes were glistening.

The waiter brought a plate of sausage rolls and more coffee and I asked Musembe if he had gone back to his village as he had planned.

"Yes, *bwana.* My brother and I planted maize with the bonus money you gave me. Our first crop was good. But there was trouble for me back home. No one in my village has ever been to Nairobi. They did not like that I had lived in the city. They said it made me act like a big man."

Ann and I had speculated about Musembe's adjustment to a life without electricity and running water, to a house made of mud and thatch, after having worked in European households for so long. It hadn't occurred to us that his village might not welcome him.

"If I had stayed, there would have been more trouble, so I came back to Nairobi to find work." His voice trailed off and his shoulders drooped. He was thin. He had lost weight.

"I am 'an applicant' now."

I frowned, uncertain of the word. "An applicant?"

He nodded. "That is what we are called. There are many men like me looking for work. There is not enough to go around. Every day I go to the employment office. This morning I was waiting for it to open."

The extremity of his situation stunned me—it was my fault for

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having kept him in a static memory, unaffected by the swirl of Kenya's economic strife.

We talked awhile longer and I asked him a few more questions, all the while wondering if there were something I could do to help him. The last thing I wanted was to raise his hopes and then not be able to deliver, so I decided not to say anything until I had a chance to explore the possibilities.

"I would like us to meet again, Musembe, so we can talk more. Can you meet me here, the day after tomorrow, Wednesday, at nine o'clock?"

"Yes, *bwana.* I will be here. I will be very happy to see you again."

"I'm staying here at The New Stanley. Here's my name and my hotel-room number." I wrote it on my business card. "If you need to leave me a message, just go to the man at the desk inside and tell him."

Musembe nodded, but I saw the uncertainty in his eyes.

"Let me show you," I said, and led the way into the lobby.

I had often walked from The Thorn Tree to the university, so I set out on the same route, curious to see what changes I would find along the way. They were not quite what I expected. The well-kept buildings I remembered had sagging roofs, collapsed walls, and were surrounded by broken concrete. Empty lots were strewn with litter and shattered glass. Even more unsettling were the clusters of listless young men sitting on the ground and idling in doorways. They eyed me sullenly as I passed. I became uneasy when I realized there were no other pedestrians around, and it had been awhile since a vehicle had passed. The temptation was to quicken my step, but I would attract less attention if I held to my stride. If I were lucky, the neighborhood would soon change.

The next empty lot offered some promise. It had been cleaned up a bit and there were no idlers hanging around, or so I thought, until three men stepped out from behind a rusted Coca-Cola sign. They started toward me, with nasty expressions in their hooded eyes. I kept walking, measuring the distance between us. I shifted my briefcase from my left hand to my right, thinking I could use it as a shield.

I'd just about decided running might not be a bad idea when a loud explosion close behind rocked the air. Smaller explosions quickly followed, and I recognized the sound of backfires. The source was a battered truck trailing puffs of black exhaust. It had startled my stalkers as it had me. They stood in their tracks as if mesmerized. Eager to take the advantage, I hurried on, and when the truck drew abreast of me I moved to hug its flank, seeing it as a haven of sorts. At the next corner it turned and I followed.

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With a sigh of relief I took in a total change of scene. Tidy plantings hugged a long whitewashed wall. Flags framed a gated driveway where two men in uniform stood guard, rifles at rest. Beyond the gates, I caught a glimpse of red-tile roofs, manicured lawns, flowering shrubs, and tall trees. The scent of oleander drifted toward me. Once again that day I thought of Lisette.

Coffee was being served when I arrived at the university, but I'd had my fill for the morning. I shook hands with the committee chairman and made my rounds of the other delegates. We represented different disciplines, but had a common goal, to review Kenya's development needs.

During the morning session I was seated next to a Kenyan journalist who had an enlightened take on his country's problems and was remarkably open with his opinions. I was glad to spend more time with him over lunch. His name was Stephen Githau and he worked for *The Nation.* I told him about Musembe, certain he would be able to shed some light on local employment problems.

"No question, there are no jobs for men like your former house servant," Githau said. "He speaks some English, can read and write a little and do some sums. That makes him too big a man for his village, but in the city he is not big enough. There are hundreds like him in Nairobi, looking for work that does not exist. This is true of many cities in Africa."

"But what does a man do without an income?"

"In our culture, it used to be that no door was closed to a relative or a friend. There was always a place to sleep. Food was shared, even when there was very little. But times are harder now for many people. A man cannot live off others. There is a lot of crime in Nairobi these days. When you lived here before, there was petty thievery, but it is much more serious now. I should warn you, it is not safe to be on the streets after dark. Even during the day, people are killed for just a few shillings."

I thought of my own close call, but didn't mention it. I was more interested in hearing what Githau had to say.

"The causes are not readily visible to an outsider," Githau said, "but they run deep. Our biggest problem is corruption, and then comes the lack of infrastructure. Politicians and government officials are stealing right and left. All our systems have broken down. The push to Africanize was too strong, and too fast." He paused and looked at me. "You are surprised to hear an African speak this way."

"I suppose I am."

"So much has gone wrong. Sometimes I must speak my mind. A big mistake was to expel the Asians. They were the *fundis,* the fixers. They were retailers, plumbers, carpenters, office managers,

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and accountants. Some were doctors and lawyers. They knew how to do everything. We forced them out. It was stupid. No one was left to do their jobs."

Githau had my full attention, and he knew it.

"Don't misunderstand. Throwing out the Asians did not happen without cause. They had treated us as the British had treated them, like lesser beings. So when we had the chance, we sent them packing. I will admit there was some pleasure in seeing them scramble to find asylum and be left dangling." He nodded for emphasis.

"But you are still wondering why I am speaking so openly." He laughed. "I will be honest. I am taking advantage of you. It is good therapy. And you are a good listener. You will go home, and you will tell others. Eventually the world will know. I do not write such things. Sometimes, I take a chance, but I do not go too far. In the Western world you say the pen is mightier than the sword. I believe that. But you have to stay alive to be able to choose your weapon."

I looked at him and hoped he knew who his enemies were.

He had read my mind. "I think it is safe for me to speak the truth in this forum. But one can never be certain. The government has its spies."

I was back at The New Stanley by midafternoon, my mind a swirl of all I had seen and heard on my first day back. I kept replaying my chance meeting with Musembe and my conversation with Stephen Githau. Although worlds apart intellectually, frustration dominated each of their lives. Musembe wanted to work and couldn't find a job. Githau wanted to write the truth, but it might cost him his life.

If Ann had come with me, I would have been talking to her about all of these things, instead of talking to myself. I missed her, and Danny, too. It was too soon to be homesick. I was just jet-lagged. A shower would give me a lift, but I wanted a quick look at *The Nation.* Maybe I'd come across Stephen Githau's byline.

I'd gone halfway through the paper, still looking, when a photograph leapt out at me. There was no accompanying story, only a caption. *Artist Lisette Manet Conducts Story Hour at Harambe Orphanage.* A group of small children sat in a circle at her feet. Through the blur of newsprint I stared at Lisette's lovely face.

I sank back against the large armchair, imagining what it would be like to see her again, to hear that soft French-accented voice for real, not in an idle daydream. Lisette had done some work at the orphanage when I knew her five years ago. This had to be an old photo, used to fill empty space. It was just too unlikely that she would be in Nairobi now.

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We had met at an art benefit on the grounds of the residence of the American ambassador. Paintings had been hung on temporary scaffolding hammered into the lawn. I had been there awhile, enjoying the diversity of the work, when I came to a wide canvas filled to its very edge with oleander blossoms. Their white petals were luminous in the reflected light of the sun. I wasn't surprised to see the painting marked SOLD and a gold ribbon pinned to its frame.

My shadow fell across the canvas, startling the young woman who stood alongside it. She looked up quickly and I saw the sparkle of tears in her eyes.

"Forgive me. It is just that I am so happy to have my painting sold. The money will go to the orphanage. But I am sad to think I will not see it again. I wish I were a writer or a musician. It is only painters who must say goodbye to their work. Some I like so well, I keep them for myself."

I had never thought about that before.

"You must think me quite vain," she said.

"Not at all. You've educated me. From now on I will look at paintings and their creators in a totally different way."

Lisette Manet was her name. Her hair was chestnut-colored, her eyes a golden brown. She was lovely. Her husband worked for an oil company and traveled all over Africa. They had been in Nairobi a year and a half.

"Sometimes I go with him, but not so often. I love it here in Nairobi. We will be here five months more. It will be good to go home to Paris, but I will miss this Africa."

The day was warm and it turned out that we were both thirsty. I had noticed a bar off in the corner of the garden when I arrived and we went there for a cold beer. We sat in the shade and talked until she had to leave for a reception. She invited me to visit her studio the next day, a cottage on a coffee estate owned by her uncle. His name was St. Claire.

I saw her that day and the day after that, often, in the four weeks left of my stay. My family had returned to the States early, so Danny could be home for the start of school. Conveniently, Lisette's husband was in West Africa.

After three rings, I heard that unmistakable French 'ello, the missing *h,* and then the rise of her voice on the second syllable.

"Lisette?" I said her name as a question, but I had no doubt she had answered the phone.

There was a pause, and then a quick breath, followed by that no-nonsense tone I remembered. *"Oui!* It is Lisette. And you? Who are you?"

"It's Brian. Brian Williams."

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"It cannot be. I don't believe it! But I do. Brian, your voice . . . I recognized it right away. No one says my name like you. I thought it was a trick my mind was playing. This is my first time back to Nairobi. And I have been thinking of you so much."

"I saw your picture in today's *Nation.* I have it in front of me. I'm looking at it now."

"You are here? In Nairobi?"

I laughed. "Where do you think I am?"

"I don't know. Phones can be anywhere."

"I'm at The New Stanley. And you? I know where you are, but what are you doing here?"

"I got lonesome for this part of the world. I've been here almost two months, but I must go back to Paris next week. My husband is there."

I hesitated only an instant. "When can I see you?"

I heard her soft laugh. "Perhaps you could come for tea today."

A grin spread across my face. She had teased me about being invited for tea and staying on for breakfast.

"I'm on my way."

"Drive carefully. And remember to stay on the left side of the road."

As I hung up the phone, I realized it was something Ann might say. The thought was fleeting. Right then my family seemed far away.

I took Uhuru Highway out of the city, through the roundabout at Westlands, and then turned onto Loresho Road. With my window rolled down, I breathed in the softly scented air. It was tinged with smoke from the charcoal fires that smoldered in the *shambas* on the hillsides, the unmistakable smell of Africa. There was some urban sprawl on either side of the road, tract housing where farmland had once been, a gas station, a mini mall, but enough thatched houses and vegetable patches dotted the softly rolling hillsides to make me feel that not everything had changed.

I had rented a car on my arrival. It would make it easy to get to the game park, and to keep my promise to Danny. I smiled. Looking in on our old house to see if Musembe was working there wasn't necessary now. I had found him.

Up ahead, I saw the beginning of the coffee estates. A dark green swath stretched across the horizon and spread from ridge to ridge, marking the acres of land planted in the lucrative crop. I drove more slowly, looking for the stone pillars that framed the wide driveway of the property that belonged to Lisette's uncle. It was the flash of sunlight glancing off the bronze plaque that caught my attention. I shifted into a lower gear to make the turn and then eased onto the pebbled track that led to the cottage.

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I found her in the garden, cutting orange daisies. She looked up at the sound of the tires on the loose stones and stood still, like a child caught in a game of statues. The flowers fell from her hands onto the grass. She came toward me, suntanned, in a pale yellow dress that swirled around her slender legs.

"I can't believe it—that you are here." Her open arms reached out to me. I kissed her forehead and then her hair. "How lucky we are," she said, and offered me her mouth.

She led me along the side of the small house to the rear garden, glancing at the flowers lying on the ground. "They are in the shade. The dew will keep them cool. Kamau will collect them when he returns from town. I had to do something after you called. I could not sit still, waiting for you. I came outside to cut flowers."

We walked in the small garden, linking arms, holding hands, exclaiming, dropping bits and pieces of our lives into the silence that surrounded us. The sky was wildly streaked with color, a signal that the sun would soon be gone. Darkness comes suddenly on the equator.

She drew me toward the small veranda, and I followed her inside.

Afterwards she lay with her head in the hollow of my shoulder. "How long before you go back to Paris?" I asked.

"Six days." She raised her head and looked down at me, her topaz eyes happy and sad. "Time will go so quickly. Afterwards it will be hard."

"I let myself forget what it's like to be with you." My voice was hoarse.

"I too," she said softly. "I couldn't go on from day to day, wishing I could be with you." She took a quick breath. "Perhaps it's not good to say such things. But I need to say them . . . here, when we are together, because when we are not, and I think of you, I am as silent as a stone. I never say your name."

We had dinner at a small table in the living room. Kamau had left us chicken, a rice salad, slices of papaya with lime, and a bottle of cold white wine. The orange daisies were in a low brass bowl on a side table.

She told me how much she had missed Kenya. "Others have said it before, so much better than I. It is all there in Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa*. I feel it, too—the skies that go on forever, the wide plains, the sounds that one hears only here. I am working on a book for children, set here. I needed to come back. I could not feel this place walking along the Rue Madeleine."

Later we sat on the sofa, facing the small fireplace where soft flames flickered, taking the chill out of the night. I had been telling her about Musembe.

"It was eerie, as though I had wished him there—on the corner of Kenyatta Avenue. But I wasn't ready for his sad news. I wish I

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could find a way to help him."

She turned to me, her eyes sparkling with a sudden thought. "I think there is something you can do. There are trade schools here now. They offer many different courses of study—carpentry, electrical work, hotel training, and others. If Musembe had a special skill, he would be able to find a job. Perhaps you could help him go to one of these schools. I can get some information for you."

I drew her toward me. "You have an answer for everything."

She shook her head. "No, not everything, my love."

I talked about the conference then. "We are to review Kenya's development programs. The country had so much potential after independence, but it has done poorly in so many areas—in family planning, education, health, agriculture. There is a Kenyan newspaperman in the group, Stephen Githau. He is vehemently critical."

"I have met him. He is a good journalist, but he should be more careful. Journalists have disappeared. Others died in accidents that everyone knows were not accidents."

Her eyes had grown troubled and sad. "Because I am here for such a short time, I have tried not to let things touch me, but it is not possible. I ease my conscience by spending some time at the orphanage. Life is hard for so many Kenyans. When you and I lived here before, we used to have *askaris* to guard our houses from petty thieves who poked fish poles through our window grills. They would hook a bracelet or a necklace left lying on a dressing table, and then run off. There is so much poverty here now. Thieves carry guns and knives. They use them. Nairobi is not a safe place now." She pressed my arm. "You must be careful."

"So must you," I said. "Is it safe for you to travel into Nairobi alone?"

"My uncle talked to me about that when I arrived this time. He insisted that I take Kamau with me whenever I went into town. I did that for a while, but I don't any longer." She saw the concern in my eyes. "Don't worry. I am careful."

She smiled then, a little sadly. "Some say it is wrong to live in the past, to long for things that were, but when I go back to Paris next week, I will remember the Africa of my first memory. Like your Danny, I will have my old slides. They will not change."

"Danny is lucky. He was in Kenya at a good time. His memories are happy ones. He will have a hundred questions for me when I get home. That worries me. But if I can help Musembe, I will have good things to tell him."

On Wednesday morning I arrived at The Thorn Tree a few minutes early, armed with the information Lisette had collected for me on trade schools. I half expected to find Musembe already there. He had always been prompt, so I was certain he would be

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along soon. I couldn't wait to talk to him about the possibilities of his acquiring a skill that would enable him to get a job. I'd already been thinking of how much this would please Danny, which brought me to thinking about Musembe's first trip to the game park and how it had come about.

I arrived home from work one day to have Danny tackle me as soon as I got out of the car. "Dad! You won't believe it!" His blue eyes were wide with indignation. "Musembe has never seen a lion! Or a zebra! Or a giraffe! He hasn't seen any game at all."

"How do you know?"

"He told me. I was talking about all the animals we saw at the game park yesterday. He said he's only seen their pictures on postcards."

I was surprised at that. I'd taken it for granted that all Kenyans had seen some wildlife. I realized how wrong I was.

"How come, Dad? Musembe's lived in Kenya all his life."

"You need a car to get to the game parks, or go on a tour. Musembe doesn't have a car, and tours are very expensive."

"We could take him, Dad, couldn't we?"

We were in our own car that day, a solid little Cortina. Ann and I were up front, with Danny and Musembe in back. We drove to the game park a few miles outside of Nairobi and followed a dirt track that wound through grassland dotted with acacia trees. Overhead, the sky was a clear crystalline blue, with puffs of high white clouds. We hadn't gone far when Musembe's gasp of wonder filled the car. On a rise, caught in the full light of a brilliant sun, was a herd of zebra. Their stripes were dazzling in the sun's white light.

We saw lots of animals that day. Once Musembe regained his voice, he began providing Danny the words for the animals in Swahili. *Simba* was lion. Musembe admitted to being afraid of the lions. His favorite was the zebra herd.

"I will never forget them," he told us that evening. "I did not know that there are so many animals and that they are so beautiful. It makes me proud to know this about my country. It is important for a man to have pride in where he lives and where he knows he will die."

When I came out of my reverie I was startled to see that it was close to nine-thirty. An uneasiness began to creep over me and I rose, signaling the waiter that I would return. There was no message at the hotel desk.

Back at my table I glanced at the packet of information I had brought with me. I was so close to being able to help Musembe, but if he didn't show up that would be the end of it. I had no way of reaching him.

At ten o'clock I took a taxi to the university, feeling pretty low. It was pointless to try to guess what might have happened. He could

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have overslept, or pride might have kept him away. He had faced me as "an applicant" once. He might not want to do that again.

I would have preferred to talk to Githau later, but he was waiting for me in the courtyard when I arrived at the university. I might as well tell him my bad news. He headed toward me, with great purpose in his step, and it struck me that there was something special on his agenda today. A newspaper was folded in his hand.

"I assume you have not seen this story." His voice had a somber tone.

I shook my head and reached for the paper.

He hesitated. "I must warn you. It is not a good story." He pointed to a column headed STREET CRIMES.

It is hard to recall what I thought when I read the short item for the first time, except that I didn't believe it. It had to be a mistake.

An unidentified man was found dead in an alley off Compos Road yesterday. He died from a stab wound to the heart. His pockets were empty, but under his body was the photograph of a European boy holding a soccer ball. The writing on the back said: "To Musembe, who taught me this game. Asante sana. Danny."

Finally I looked at Githau, who had been silent until then. "I am sorry. This man was important to you and to your son."

I wasn't ready for condolences. "We can't be sure that it's Musembe," I said. "It could be someone else." I glanced away and then back.

"We had an appointment to meet this morning, at nine o'clock. He didn't come. It wasn't like him. I waited until ten. I knew something had to be wrong, but not this."

Githau drew me to a bench off to the side. "It is possible that it could be someone else, but since Musembe did not keep his appointment with you, it is not likely. If you want to make certain, I can help you with that."

I nodded. "I need to know."

"That is what I thought you would say. I have already inquired. The body is at the morgue." He paused and then went on. "There are some things you should know before you decide to make the identification. The procedure will be quite routine. The authorities will be glad to have the morgue population reduced, if only by one. They have no resources and therefore no interest in finding out who the dead man is. Musembe was a man without a job, without an address, and without a name, except for the one you knew him by. If you identify him as the man you knew, they will expect you to take care of his remains."

I frowned. I hadn't thought that far. I hadn't even accepted that Musembe was dead. I had admired Githau's directness before. It bothered me now. Even so, I appreciated his intent. He was providing me with a map of what I was about to face.

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"You will be expected to pay for his burial or his cremation. The latter is a simpler matter, and it is not a big expense. If I am with you, they will not ask you for money under the table."

I wanted to laugh. It had to be nerves.

It turned out that the morgue was closed that morning, but would open at two that afternoon. Githau needed to go back to his office for a while, and we agreed to meet in front of the morgue at two-thirty.

I was grateful to have him with me. He had told me he had been there before. I hadn't asked why. This was a first for me. I anticipated it would be grim, and it was.

There is no privacy in death. Large cabinets held large trays on which the deceased lay sandwiched side by side. It took some time for the attendant to find the right tray. I kept hoping that I would not see the man I had known.

The procedure that followed was tedious, but eventually all the forms were filled out. I was handed a receipt and told to present it at the crematorium the next day. The ashes would be turned over to me.

I decided to wait to tell Lisette when I got to the cottage that evening. As it turned out, she already knew. She had seen the story in the paper that morning and when she hadn't been able to reach me, she had thought to call Stephen Githau. He returned her call after our visit to the morgue.

It made it easier that she knew. There were some things that no longer had to be said, which made room for others. We sat on the sofa facing the fire. I had been talking about Danny, trying to work through what I would tell him.

Lisette's hand rested lightly on my arm. "It is too soon to know the answer to that," she said softly. "It will come to you."

"Whatever I tell him, it will change everything."

"No, not everything. Danny will always remember the Kenyan he knew as a small child, who showed him how to play soccer. When Musembe spoke to you of *Bwana Kidogo,* he was telling you he remembered your little boy. They had their memories of each other. Danny will always have those."

Her words sounded good, but they didn't work for me. "Memories are one thing, but reality is something else. If I hadn't found Musembe . . . if I hadn't given him the envelope . . . the shillings . . . he would still be alive. How will Danny feel when I tell him that?"

"You will have to think hard about what you say when you get home." Her eyes bore hard into mine. "Truth may seem right, but it is not always kind. You have had to make such choices before." In the soft flickering light I studied the pale oval of her face and knew she was talking about us.

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The day after Lisette flew home to Paris I drove to the game park on the outskirts of Nairobi and followed the same winding track we had taken that day when Danny and Musembe were seated together in the back of our car. The terrain hadn't changed—sprawling, lush grassland dotted with acacia trees. The sky overhead was that same amazing crystalline blue, dotted with puffs of high white clouds.

It was Danny who had given me my direction. At each recounting of that special day, he repeated the words Musembe had said. "It is important for a man to feel pride in where he lives and where he knows he will die."

The track curved and I rounded the familiar bend, my hand on the small cardboard container on the seat beside me. There on a grassy rise, dazzling in the bright light of an African sun, was the zebra herd. It was as though they had been waiting for us. ●

Getting to Know Manny Lee **(continued from page 6)**

civil rights, and a critic of racism, anti-Semitism, and McCarthyism.

Manny spent virtually his entire youth in and around Brooklyn, while Fred's family moved to Elmira in rural upstate New York when Fred was still a baby. But in adulthood it was Fred who would settle in Larchmont, close to the big city, while Manny migrated to a sixty-three-acre estate in Roxbury, Connecticut.

In their collaboration, Fred wrote elaborate synopses, sometimes the length of a book in their own right. He then sent them to Manny, who fleshed them out with dialogue, description, and characterization. Manny once acknowledged that the character of Ellery's father, Inspector Richard Queen, was modeled after his own dad as well as his father-in-law.

The lively arguments between Fred and Manny are well documented. Both men loved detective fiction and wanted to see it elevated to higher literary standards. Each had high ideals, and were probably the harshest critics of their own—and each other's—work. Rand Lee recalls how his father tried to dissuade him from reading the early novel *The Roman Hat Mystery,* calling it "that awful thing." Rand's sister, Kit, once heard Lee refer to himself as a "literary prostitute." But despite the self-criticism and the mutual criticism, it is clear that Fred and Manny loved their books—and loved each other as well.

Manny may have been more behind-the-scenes and offstage than his cousin, but he was an integral half of the Ellery Queen team. Fred's editorial activities at the helm of *EQMM* continued, but Ellery Queen as a novelist and short story writer ceased to exist with Manny's death in 1971.

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Art by Mark Evans

The Ice Storm

by Helen Tucker

At three P.M. on December 5 a mistlike rain began falling which was replaced at three-fifteen by tiny snowflakes, which, in turn, were replaced by small slivers of ice that looked like little pieces of broken crystal. By four P.M. the area was wrapped in a full-fledged ice storm complete with downed power lines, falling limbs unable to bear the weight of the ice, and, finally, the trees themselves hitting the ground. The noise was that of a battlefield in the midst of a disastrous war as trees and telephone poles fell and transformers exploded. By one-thirty A.M. there were three hundred thousand in the city and a million and a half in the area without electricity or heat. Those who tried to move out of dark, cold houses to hotels found that most of the hotels also were without power, while those that had it, thanks to generators, were fully booked.

Brody awoke with a start and sat up on the cot, not having the slightest idea where he was. He looked at the luminous dial on the watch he had boosted from Halloran's Jewelry last week. It was one-thirty.

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There were noises in the room, grunts and groans, mumbled words. Then he remembered.

He was in the basement of the Church of the Divine Word, where ten cots were made available for the homeless. But he wasn't homeless, at least not permanently, only for that one night. His friend Nathan, custodian of the church, who occasionally served as preacher, had given him the cot for the night so he wouldn't have to sleep in his old Chevy.

"Ice storm coming tonight, Brody," Nathan had said. "You can't sleep in your car. You'll freeze unless you keep the motor running, and if you do that, you'll die of carbon monoxide."

This new story, author Helen Tucker tells us, was born of the horrendous ice storm that hit her hometown of Raleigh, North Carolina in December, 2002. The events related in the story didn't actually happen, she says, but they could have: "Some people were without heat and electricity for two weeks." Ms. Tucker is a former journalist, and she has a knack for taking real events and spinning round them a diverting fictional plot.

Nathan always pretended he knew so much, but Brody would bet Nathan hadn't gone any further than seventh grade, which was where he himself had called it quits. But Nathan had been his friend ever since he had taken Nathan's part against a cop a few months ago.

Nathan had been preaching on a street corner downtown when a cop had tried to shoo him off by saying something like, "Panhandling is against the law. Go on, fellow, or I'll have to run you in."

"I'm not panhandling," Nathan said with great dignity. "I'm trying to save the souls of sinners, yours included."

"Go on, beat it." Obviously the cop figured his soul didn't need saving or that its salvation didn't rest with this guy with the shoulder-length brown hair and beard stubble that was trying to grow longer.

Brody had been standing in front of a nearby liquor store observing the action when he became POed. He pushed forward from the small crowd gathering and said, "Hey, leave the guy alone. He ain't hurting nobody. Don't you know nothing about free speech?"

"I know if you don't both disappear in a hurry, you're going to get a chance to speak freely before a judge."

Nathan took Brody's arm. "Let's go, friend. Some people can be counted on in this world to choose the wrong way."

Since then, Nathan had been trying to save Brody's soul, but Brody forgave him because sometimes Nathan took him to the Church of the Divine Word where he was given soup and a sandwich.

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One-thirty in the morning. What had awakened him? It wasn't all that noise outside; he could sleep through a volley of cannon. Then he realized: The light bulb hanging from the ceiling had gone out. That meant the power was off, because that light was left burning all night. Lights suddenly going on or off had always awakened Brody. When his wife would get up in the night and turn on a light, it always woke him up, no matter how quiet she was.

His wife. What a thankless little twit Maggie turned out to be, throwing him out just because he didn't have a steady job, didn't stay out of the house from nine to five every day. Hell, he provided for her, didn't he? Why should she care where the money came from? He had supplied all of her needs and most of her wants. Anyway, he didn't miss a night's sleep because of her. He went straight to his girlfriend, who took him in and was glad to get him. Tessa kept telling him how handsome he was, which was unnecessary because he knew it. He was tall and lean with dark curly hair and, the thing that really turned Tessa on, had deep dimples. He wore good-looking clothes, straight off the rack and out of the store, until one day last week this little thingamajig inside a navy sports coat caused a terrific racket as he went out the door. He'd already taken one of those things out, which was no small job, and didn't realize there was another in a sleeve. A security officer grabbed him and damn if he didn't end up at the nearest precinct.

"I was going to pay for it," he told the cops. "I just forgot. I had this thing on my mind, you know. My wife is deathly sick and I couldn't think about anything else."

They didn't believe him, but they let him go after he paid for the coat, because he didn't have a rap sheet and he promised never to go in that store again.

But the whole mess was in a little squib in the newspaper the next day under police reports. And Tessa, wouldn't you know, always read those things.

When he got up the next morning, there was no breakfast on the table for him, and Tessa was waiting, obviously late for her job at Winn-Dixie. "Brody, I want you out of here in the next fifteen minutes. I know now exactly where your money comes from and you're not using my house another day for your criminal activities. You're nothing but pond scum."

So she had figured it out, had she? How? He had been so careful. Even Maggie had never known exactly how he ran his business. Since he was just a little fellow—he couldn't remember at what age it had started—he had been an expert shoplifter. Anything he wanted, he took: candy, gum, toys. Later, he found he could make money by selling these things, so he always had plenty of spending money. Then, years later, the idea hit him that he should go into the business, which was what he did. He let the word out that

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he was a manufacturer's representative and could order whatever anyone wanted at less than would be charged at a store. As the word spread, orders began coming in and he filled them. There was hardly a store in the city that hadn't lost merchandise because of his deft fingers.

Somehow Tessa had found out . . . and that was when he had begun sleeping in his old Chevy . . . until yesterday when he had run into Nathan on the street and told him he had been kicked out of house and home.

"Forecasters say an ice storm is coming," Nathan said. "Why don't you come with me to the church and stay there until the storm is over?"

So here he was, although he almost wasn't. When they got to the basement, Nathan said, "What's your first name, Brody? Strange, I've never heard it."

"I don't use it," Brody said. "Haven't since I cut out when I was fifteen."

"But we have to have the full name of everybody who stays here," Nathan insisted. "It's a very strict rule."

"Jee-zus, ain't nothing private anymore?"

"Come on, Brody."

He whispered. "It's Micah. And you damn well better not tell anybody."

He lay there in the darkness, listening to the noise outside. Then a beam of light, a flashlight, came through the door that led to the stairs up to the sanctuary, and he recognized Nathan's voice. "Everybody all right down here?"

"What the devil's going on out there?" A growl came from a cot near Brody.

"Ice storm," Nathan said. "Pretty bad one. Lights are out everywhere in this part of town. Probably all over. I'll leave a lantern down here for you." He lit the lantern, which was not quite as bright as the flashlight and which reeked of kerosene. "We won't be able to give you a hot breakfast, but you can have bread and jam."

The man on the other side of Brody uttered an obscenity which, thankfully, Nathan didn't hear, because he hated foul language. Brody lay back down and went to sleep, because the events of the past few days had worn him to a frazz-zell.

When he awoke again there was a tiny bit of light, daylight, coming through the little window that looked out on the sidewalk. Only a couple of cots, from which came snores, were still occupied. He went to the tiny bathroom and washed his face. His shaving stuff, along with a change of clothes, was still in the Chevy. Then he went to the outside door, opened it, and went up the four steps to the sidewalk, carefully holding on to the rail. Ice was everywhere.

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Overhead, underfoot, dead ahead, hanging from trees and poles and covering cars parked in the street. The Church of the Divine Word was in the residential historical part of downtown, and Brody could see a few houses with ice-laden trees lying on top of them.

"Jee-zus," he murmured. He'd seen ice before, but never anything like this. It wouldn't surprise him to see Nathan walking the streets with a sign that stated THIS IS THE END OF THE WORLD.

As though he had conjured up the man, Nathan spoke right behind him. "This must be what the ice age looked like."

"Hell with that, this *is* the ice age," Brody said.

"Power's off everywhere," Nathan said. "I got a little battery radio upstairs and it said three counties are without power."

"Whoo-wee! Why don't the power companies do something?"

"They started as soon as the first reports came in. It'll take awhile, maybe ten or twelve days to get the lights on everywhere again. Everybody that can afford it has gone east or south looking for warm hotels. Parts of the city are like a ghost town."

"That so?" Brody straightened up as power was suddenly turned on in his head and a light bulb flashed. "Got any more of that bread and jam left, Nathan? I got some thinking to do and I can't do it on an empty stomach."

He followed Nathan back inside to a tiny makeshift kitchen just off the sleeping area. "I wish we could afford better facilities," Nathan said, "but even though we've got a pretty large congregation, they don't have much money."

Brody was slathering strawberry jam on a slice of bread and didn't answer. It was earlier words of Nathan's that filled his head.

The power could be off for a long time. Everybody who could afford it had left town looking for a warm place. Parts of the city were like a ghost town. Whoo-weee!

He put half of a slice of bread in his mouth at one time and hurried back to the big room. The whole place was now like an arctic glacier and getting colder all the time. Nathan followed him. "That's right, get back under the cover," he said as Brody sat down on the cot. "I wish we could afford a gas heater for this room. It wouldn't heat the whole place, but it would be a help."

"I wish you could, too," Brody said, pulling the blanket up under his chin. It was almost two P.M. He'd slept most of the morning away, now if he could sleep until dark . . .

But that one little blanket didn't provide much warmth and the room was now so cold he expected frost to form on his face. Sleep wasn't possible, so he lay there going over every little detail of the plan that was going to be *his* salvation.

Come nightfall, the entire city would be dark except for those few places that had generators. The rich as well as the poor would be without electricity, the difference being that the rich would

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have left town. All those houses ranging from a half million to two million would be ripe for the picking, and he was a prime picker.

Burglar alarms? Forget 'em. Most of them were tied into the electric lines, and those that operated on batteries, no problem. There wouldn't be anyone around but him to hear them screeching. And those that rang in the police station? You could forget them, too. Half the time they were set off by squirrels or birds or even tree branches rubbing against windows, and with all this ice and trees falling every which way, alarms were expected to go off. Besides, the police would be busy with other things like wrecks, emergencies, and like that.

Yeah, man, this ice storm could be a blessing. His blessing. Hey, and maybe Nathan's, too. Nathan wanted so many things for the church. If Brody couldn't actually find certain things in the houses, he could get something else, sell it, and give the money to Nathan. That made him, Brody, one of the good guys, didn't it? Always thinking of the needs of others.

He got up and went looking for Nathan, finding him in the tiny kitchen trying to figure out how to have soup and sandwiches for anyone who might drop in for supper.

"Nathan, I got a great idea."

"What's that?"

"I know how I can get you practically everything you need for the church."

"How's that?"

"Tonight I can go to some of these houses where people live who have more money, more everything, than they know what to do with, and they can donate."

"Nobody's home now."

"That's the point."

"You mean steal?" Nathan's whole face puckered up in one huge frown. "The Good Book says 'Thou shalt not steal.' "

"It ain't exactly stealing when you take from somebody who has everything, more than everything."

"Thanks, but no thanks, Robin Hood."

"Who the hell's he?"

"This dude who took from the rich and gave to the poor, and now he's doing ten to twenty in Central Prison."

Brody sighed. Why would some friggin' judge sentence a man who tried to help the poor?

"Don't even think about it, Brody."

"Okay, man, but I think *you're* the one making a mistake." He went back to the cot and lay down, then got right back up. There were things he had to do to get ready. Like chipping all the ice off the old Chevy and trying to get it to start. He went outside again and pulled his coat collar up around his ears. Jee-zus, it was cold

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enough out here to freeze the ass off a polar bear.

His car was half a block down the street from the church, parked in front of a Victorian house painted purple and blue. All the old houses—and they were all ancient, among the first built in the city—were painted in bright colors, some outlandishly so.

There was a tree lying right across the street in front of his car, which meant he would have to go around the block if he managed to get the car started. The car itself, when he got right up to it, was covered completely with a thick coating of ice, as though it had been gift-wrapped in cellophane. There was no way he could separate ice from the car with his bare hands. A bucket of hot water would do it, but where would he get hot water? He went back to the church, back to the kitchen, only to find that Nathan was no longer there. He fumbled around in several drawers and found something he could use: an ice pick.

At the car again after almost slipping on the icy sidewalk, he began chipping slowly and carefully at the windshield, trying to get through the ice without breaking the glass. After a long time, he managed to get the driver's side clear. Next he started on the driver's door. If he could get in and turn on the defroster, it would shorten his work.

This task took longer than the windshield, because even after getting the ice off the handle and edge of the door, he couldn't open it. It was just plain stuck. He kept chipping and chipping and chipping, not caring now if he scarred the old car. He was ready to drive it south, anyhow, abandon it, all except the license plate, and pick up a newer one. Those were the operative words: pick up.

Finally, the job was done. With a mighty tug, he opened the door, got in, and tried to start. Nothing. Jeez, did the battery freeze? He tried again, pumping the gas. The motor coughed and died. Just as he was about to give up, he gave one last try, pushing the gas pedal all the way to the floor. Success! Now he'd sit in the car with the heater on until enough of the ice was melted for him to drive. Remembering Nathan's words about carbon monoxide, he stuck his head out the door every now and then. The windows were all stuck, so he couldn't lower them.

There were no people on the sidewalks, none in the street, and no cars. Obviously, the population of this whole section of town had decided to stay indoors. Which suited Brody right down to the ground. Or maybe, as in more affluent sections, all the people had left, seeking a warmer clime.

He chuckled. The hard work was over, getting the car de-iced and started. The rest would be a piece of cake. He laughed out loud. A piece of cake with icing!

He woke up slowly, stretched, and hit his feet against the gas pedal

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and brake. He was in the car, toasty warm, the heater running, and it was dark as midnight outside. He had gone to sleep in the car and now he was stiff and hungry. Being warm for the first time since last night had done it, made him sleepy. There were no streetlights on, which meant still no power. He looked at his watch: eight-thirty. That meant the car had been running for hours.

And the gas gauge was just a fraction away from the red E. But there was enough left in the tank for him to get his mission accomplished and head for a gas station, after which he would take off for the state line, just across which was his favorite fence.

He went around the block, avoiding the tree lying across the street, and was on his way to what he thought of as "the golden section." Where the super-rich lived. Lake Park and Willow Lane and Castle Road.

This really wasn't his thing, he thought as he hunched over the wheel. B and E was simply too much trouble, and because there were so many new technical devices to prevent housebreaking, it was far more dangerous than boosting a store. And if you got caught, a stiffer sentence. But this ice storm was too fabulous an opportunity to pass up.

On the other hand, lifting a store wasn't as easy as it used to be, either. For a while the boosters had had it made. They'd get big shopping bags, line them with heavy aluminum foil, which prevented the door alarms from going off, and just walk right out with anything and everything. He'd even got fur coats out that way! And then the cops caught on and the stores' security dicks were on the lookout. But he himself had a stroke of luck. He'd managed to lift one of those little gizmos clerks used to cut off the tags that made the alarm go off, and all he had to do was take something into a fitting room, put a handkerchief over the little camera that took pictures, quickly take off the tag, and then get the hell out with whatever he wanted. Tally-ho!

Now, there were almost no cars on the streets, but because of the ice, he drove very slowly. A skid would ruin everything; there could be no slip-ups.

Purposely, he had chosen sections of town that were not gated. There could be some dumb schmo who was willing to sit in that little box, freezing his ass off, for an extra buck or two in his Christmas tip three weeks from now.

He reached Castle Road first, the street undoubtedly named for the size of the houses. The street, as everywhere else, was dark as the sin Nathan was always spouting about. He pulled into the circular drive of a graystone edifice, turned off the ignition, and reached in the backseat for his mammoth flashlight. He'd bet he could fill the car up right here and drive away singing "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town."

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Outside the car, it was still cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey, so he hurried to get this over quickly. He went to the back of the house, shining his light over the dark windows and doors, and then the backyard where there was a swimming pool and pool house.

A sudden brainstorm sent him to the little house, which was locked, but that was no big deal. He smashed in the front window, found the latch on the door, opened it, and went in. Once he had heard something about families hiding keys to the house in little houses outside. It was worth a look.

It took him almost five minutes to find a key over the ledge of one of the windows. Now to find which door it would open.

The back door, of course, leading to the kitchen. Which reminded him again that he was starving. He shone his light everywhere, looking for an alarm box, which he found on the wall and quickly smashed. It might still be ringing in some cop shop, but by the time they decided it wasn't a malfunction caused by the storm, he'd be long gone. He went back to the car and brought in empty boxes.

Then to the fridge, which, like everything else, wasn't working. But inside was a beef roast, some kind of casserole, all sorts of fruits, and a pie. All going bad if he didn't eat them now.

After stuffing himself, he cased the first floor of the house. In the great room, which was as big as most houses, was a Christmas tree with about a dozen presents under it. Jeez, he might as well celebrate now, open a few since he couldn't think of anyone who would give him a present come Christmas.

He pulled off the bow of the largest package, tore the wrapping away, and opened the box. As empty as the inside of Nathan's head when he refused to let Brody get the things he needed for the church. He opened a second package and . . . same thing. What the hell was wrong with these people, giving each other nothing, beautifully wrapped? Were the packages just decorations, substituting for the real presents that would come later? Go figure.

Next he went to the dining room, the treasure room of the house. There was enough silver to open a store: a cabinet full of trays, pitchers, tea sets, even teeny-weeny little silver cups, whatever they were called. He tried to open the door and damn if it wasn't locked. Whatsa matter? Didn't these people even trust their servants? He used a chair to smash the glass and then emptied the contents of the cabinet into a box. Next, he found the flat silver, which—good God!—wasn't silver at all but gold! He took the box to the car and put it in the backseat because it was too large for the trunk. Then he went back in and hunted for the master bedroom, which turned out to be a suite downstairs. The closet yielded a mink jacket and some kind of full-length fur coat. In spite of the animal-rights people, these things still sold well.

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The other side of the walk-in closet contained men's clothes. He tried on a jacket and it fit, then he held a pair of pants up to himself and they seemed to be his size, so with one great sweep of the arm, he took a whole row of clothes. He could use some new threads.

He took the second box to the car and went back in the house for one last look. People this rich usually kept valuable jewelry in a safety-deposit box or else in a safe at home, which he wouldn't even attempt to open, but maybe . . .

He went through the drawers in the master bedroom and found nothing of interest. Underwear, sweaters, and like that. Then he went back to the closet because he hadn't really gone over the shelves above the clothes. There were shoes, which he brushed off the shelves, and then he saw a green box with little drawers behind the shoes. He took it down, opened it, and behold: jewelry! He wasn't sure that it was real, could be costume stuff, but he threw it in the box anyway. Louie the fence might think it was real after seeing all the other stuff that was real.

Back in the car, he decided he needn't go to another house. He had enough loot here to bring a fortune. He started the car, and the first thing that caught his eye was the gas gauge. It was sitting right on empty. He'd have to find a gas station quick before he was stranded with this awesome haul.

He headed straight for the highway south. That would be his best bet and he was going south anyway. Nervously, he kept watching the gauge as he drove, thinking maybe the cold kept it from rising a little.

Finally, the car lights picked out a station ahead. But when he drove up, it was as dark as the night. Closed. Well, there were several more on the edge of town and they couldn't all be closed.

Another mile down the highway he came to a second station and this one was open because he could see a light inside. He drove up beside a pump, got out, and went in. The light was a lantern. A middle-aged man wearing a red cap and red sweater said, "I was just getting ready to close up and go home. Only reason I've stayed open is because people come in for snacks. Some day and night! Worst ice storm I can remember."

"Sure is," Brody agreed. "How about I get some gas before you close?"

The man took off his cap, rubbed his hand across a nearly bald head, and looked at Brody as though he'd just escaped from the local nut house. "You're kidding."

"Why the hell would I kid about needing gas? I'm on empty."

"You can't pump gas," the man said. "There's no electricity."

Brody stared at him. "What you talking about, man?"

"The pumps are run by electricity. You can't pump gas if the power is off. Telephone is the only thing that's still working

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around here."

Jee-zus, he'd never thought of that. Only thing he could do was keep driving until he was out of the powerless area . . . if his gas lasted that long.

He started the car, which gave a little cough, but he was able to move away from the station and back to the road. After a few yards, *the car coughed again. And died.*

He sat there, stunned. He tried to think of a word bad enough to describe the predicament he was in, but such a word did not exist. What in *hell* was he going to do now? Out of gas, no gas available, and a car full of lifted loot. Whoo-weeee! Finding this would be a cops' paradise, and good old Brody would be over there in Central with that Robin fellow.

Then the power went on in his head again, light bulb shining. Of course! The perfect solution. He'd walk back to the gas station and call Nathan to come get him. Nathan would give him the devil, natch, but he wouldn't refuse to come, and he wouldn't turn his pal in. After all, hadn't he stood up for Nathan with the cops once?

Yeah, that was it. Nathan probably would scowl at the three boxes Brody loaded in his car, but he wouldn't say a word, pretending he didn't even know what they were.

He opened the car door and got out. Damn ice everywhere. He stepped carefully, realizing the soles of his shoes were as slick as ice-skate blades. He closed the door, and in pushing, one of his legs went out from under him, followed by the other as he leaned to catch the door handle for leverage.

He was down, screaming in pain.

He tried to get up, but couldn't. The pain in his left leg was intolerable. Broken. He knew it was broken. Through his pants he could feel a bone sticking up where it shouldn't oughta be.

"Help!" he yelled. "Help me!"

The gas station man was standing there beside the last pump.

"Hey," Brody hollered. "Call my friend Nathan at the Church of the Divine Word to come get me."

The man disappeared inside the station and Brody groaned as he tried again to move. Law of the world, he knew. Just when everything is going right, something has to go wrong.

The station manager came back and stood beside Brody. "No answer at the church, so I called nine-one-one. They're sending an ambulance."

"Oh, man!" Brody wailed. He knew exactly what would be coming with the medics. An ambulance never went out on a call without a cop car following . . . and sometimes the cops even got there first.

"What did you tell them?"

"I said a man here got hurt real bad when he slipped up on the ice." ●

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The Grotto

by Donald Olson

On that June day, which promised to be as uneventful as any other, Enid Ramlow nibbled a slice of toast in the breakfast room and favored the world with an uncommonly benevolent smile as she looked across the table at her companion-housekeeper.

"My dear Annie, you've done a most commendable job in sprucing up the old barn for our visitor's inspection. And you must give my compliments to Richards. He's done wonders with the garden. I feel we've all allowed ourselves to become a bit slack lately."

Among the several organizations that have begun sponsoring awards for mystery fiction over the past few years is *Deadly Pleasures*, a leading fan-oriented magazine devoted to searching out the best works in the field. Editor George Easter named the magazine's award the Barry in honor of noted reviewer Barry Gardner. We're delighted that one of this year's Barry nominees for best story is Donald Olson ("Rogue's Run"; *EQMM* 4/03). ✝

The "old barn" was one of those columned mansions one saw more frequently in the South. The visitor Mrs. Ramlow referred to was a woman named Maria Slade who had written to ask permission to photograph the house, called Chestnut Hill, for a book she was writing on the influence of the Greek Revival tradition in Northeastern architecture.

"The girls at our Heritage Society tea on Thursday were pea-green with envy. Mildred especially, who seems to think that monstrosity of hers should be granted historical landmark status. Who is she kidding?"

"Will it be just the three of us for lunch?"

"Yes. I'm so glad the weather held fine. We can eat in the rose garden. That should impress the woman."

Impressing strangers was almost as great a pleasure for Enid Ramlow as impressing friends. At her age it was one of the few pleasures left, along with an overweening pride of possession. She was now in her late seventies, although her blue-rinsed hair, plucked and penciled eyebrows, and imperious manner betrayed a vanity undiminished by the years.

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"Don't forget," Annie reminded her, "to call your lawyer this morning. He said there were important documents you should not delay signing."

"There's no urgency. It's his fee he doesn't want delayed, the old skinflint."

Nevertheless she sat down to phone Stuart Baldwin once she had conducted a final inspection of the rooms and made sure there were fresh flowers arranged as she had ordered.

"You may as well come for lunch, Stuart. You know more about the history of the house than I do. At least you can talk about the family without sounding as if you're bragging."

"Thank you, Enid. So long as we can get down to business after your visitor's left."

"You sound cranky, Stuart. And on such a lovely day."

"If I sound cranky you know why. You're wasting my time and your money on this ridiculous whim of yours. There's still time for you to reconsider."

"I'm not yet senile, Stuart. I know my own mind and it's perfectly capable of making decisions whether you agree with them or not. Lunch will be served at one. Don't be late."

The car in which Maria Slade arrived, an old station wagon of a type no longer made and showing its age, was the first negative impression she produced on Mrs. Ramlow, who peered discreetly from the window as Annie greeted the visitor. Nor did the young woman's too-warm-for-the-weather tweedy outfit look less travel-worn. Yet Mrs. Ramlow had to concede that the woman wore this unfortunate attire with a style that complemented her tall, slim figure. Her features were unremarkable but not unattractive. Good bones, thought Mrs. Ramlow, and the sort of understated makeup with which she could find no fault. She carried a brown leather bag over one shoulder and a camera over the other.

Mrs. Ramlow did not miss the gleam of approval on the girl's face as she looked around the entrance hall with its curved staircase and polished parquet floor.

"I do appreciate your invitation, Mrs. Ramlow," she said in a low-pitched voice that reminded the older woman of a gracefully ageing movie star—was it Hepburn or Bacall?

"My pleasure," replied Mrs. Ramlow. "I hope you'll find my humble abode worthy of your interest. How soon will your book be published?"

"Oh, not for several months yet. I suppose you'd call it a work in progress."

They had advanced into the living room, furnished in the best of Federal and Victorian furniture and accoutrements. Mrs. Ramlow was pleased to see the visitor's gaze pausing in its exploration of the room at the painting over the white marble fireplace.

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"My late husband, Colonel Ramlow, had it painted shortly after we married. Although you wouldn't know it was me now," said Mrs. Ramlow, quite certain she would. To herself it was an image little changed from the one she saw with satisfaction in her mirror.

"Indeed I would. Everything in the room is consistent with the period. Quite enchanting."

Mrs. Ramlow decided she approved of this young woman. Her taste in clothes might be deficient, but she clearly had an eye for what was good in décor.

"We'll be lunching in the garden, the roses are so lovely now. My other guest, my lawyer, will be joining us."

Maria Slade looked taken aback. "Your lawyer? I'm afraid I failed to tell you that I won't be requiring any written release from you at present."

"No, no," said Mrs. Ramlow with an amused laugh, "Mr. Baldwin had some tiresome business to discuss with me so I thought he might as well come for lunch. He's not pleased with me right now so I thought it would be a good idea to feed him."

She had no sooner said this when the man himself arrived. Annie let him in and showed him into the living room. He was no younger than Mrs. Ramlow, with the corpulent figure and white head and beard of a Santa Claus in blue serge.

Introductions were made. Mrs. Ramlow said, "Why don't you entertain yourselves while I check with Mildred on lunch. Mr. Baldwin can fill you in on the history of the house—he's known it longer than I, even."

Mildred had been brought in, as she frequently was on special occasions, to prepare the meal and impress the visitor. While their hostess was gone, Baldwin played the role he was assigned, more of family friend than lawyer, to sketch for Maria Slade a history of the house and family. As he talked, she took notes and put to him astute questions to which he had ready answers.

"I understand Mrs. Ramlow is a widow, but has she a family? Children?"

"Regrettably, no," said the lawyer brusquely.

"What a shame. No one to enjoy all this after she's gone?"

Baldwin grimaced. "I don't think she plans to go, not for another twenty years."

When Mrs. Ramlow returned, Baldwin was examining a sheaf of photographs Maria Slade had taken from her bag. "You do excellent work," he said.

"For a nonprofessional I don't do too badly."

Mrs. Ramlow put on her glasses and studied the pictures. They were all of Greek Revival-type buildings, mostly houses. "Very impressive," she said, snatching off her glasses. "I'm confident you'll do justice to Chestnut Hill. A pity you don't include pictures of the gardens. I'm sure very few of them would match my own.

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My husband was very proud of his landscaping skills. I shall give you a tour after lunch."

"You must show her the grotto," said Annie.

"Later, later. I believe lunch is about to be served, in the rose garden."

They all trooped through the house and across a trellised veranda draped in clematis into the rose garden. Mrs. Ramlow relished her guest's outspoken admiration as she directed them to chairs around a glass-topped table under a blue and white striped umbrella. She had decided on her second-best china and crystal; after all, they were only entertaining a writer. She allowed Baldwin, who could be quite garrulous in the presence of an attractive young woman, to lead the conversation. When it strayed too far from the wonders of the estate and the distinguished history of the family, she was quick to intervene. It was pleasant to inhale the heady scent of the roses while protected under the umbrella from the heat of the midday sun.

Mrs. Ramlow managed to imply in her casual, drawling manner that luncheons in the rose garden were by no means a rare treat. In truth, she had never, even in the colonel's day, been a popular hostess; her social manner was, if anything, even more autocratic and prideful then than it was now when she had few friends left and her social engagements were limited if not almost nonexistent. So her present enjoyment was not feigned.

Yes, the luncheon party was a marked success. After coffee and one of Mildred's special summertime desserts, Mrs. Ramlow suggested that she might conduct her guest on a ramble through the gardens before she took her photographs. "Or would you prefer to do that first?" she inquired.

"A bit later would be perfect. The light should be about right then."

Baldwin rose, patting his stomach with a satisfied smile of repletion. "I think I'll take a little snooze while you ladies enjoy yourselves. I'm not much of a walker anymore."

"Annie, dear," said Mrs. Ramlow, "would you please fetch my stick from the house." She turned to Maria Slade. "As you can see, there's nothing frail about me, but I do get the occasional dizzy spell if I'm in the sun too long."

From the rose garden a serpentine path led through alleys bordered with low-clipped hedges and flower beds, a colorful panorama of floral extravagance, interspersed with weathered statuary, stone benches, and more than one sundial.

"Richards, my gardener, is a jewel," said Mrs. Ramlow, indicating with her silver-headed walking stick certain features of which she was most proud. "He's nearly as ancient as I am; I don't think I could ever replace him if the need arose. It's almost impossible to find good people nowadays."

"You're a fortunate lady," observed Maria Slade, "to spend your days in the midst of all this beauty."

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"So everyone tells me, and I must agree they're right."

"Most of us, alas, must settle for the commonplace pleasures of life."

Presently they passed through a garden gate between walls of cypresses onto a weedless lawn at the end of which rose the garden's most eye-catching feature. "I'm sure you'll never see anything like this outside of the stately homes of England, or Italy."

Each side of a man-made hill revealed broad terraces rising to a stone-balustraded parapet below which a grotto of boulders opened into the hillside, in front of which lay a circular pool thick with waterlilies. The terraces formed gently ascending steps rising to the paved overlook.

Maria Slade was visibly impressed as the two women crossed the lawn and paused at the foot of the steps.

"My husband," said Mrs. Ramlow, "was in Italy during the war—Hitler's war, you know—and fell in love with Italian architecture. When he returned, he built the grotto. He called it his Palladian Folly. The water in the pond is fed from a stream deep inside the grotto. Quite marvelous, isn't it?"

"Charming," said Maria Slade. "And so secluded. You can't even see the house from here."

"Come along. The steps are so low-pitched it requires no effort to climb them. The view from the top is worth it."

"I should have brought my camera," said Maria Slade as side by side, Mrs. Ramlow using her stick and holding lightly to her companion's arm, they climbed the broad grassy steps to the flagstoned parapet overlooking the pond. From there, only the roof of the house was visible above the trees. The hills beyond were a pale wash of blue.

They looked down into the rock-rimmed pond, its green crystal surface dappled with sunlight and starred with water lilies.

"Are there goldfish?" asked Maria Slade.

"And carp, would you believe. It's very deep."

"I'll bet your daughter found this a magical place.

Mrs. Ramlow went suddenly rigid. "What did you say?"

"I said, your daughter must have found this place a magical spot."

"I never had a daughter."

"Her name was Miriam, wasn't it?"

Mrs. Ramlow tried to meet the younger woman's eyes but they were fixed somewhere in the distance. "Have you been talking to Mr. Baldwin?"

"He told me you had no children. That was untrue. You had a daughter whose name was Miriam."

Mrs. Ramlow moved slightly aside. "You're misinformed."

"How old was she when she drowned? Nineteen?"

Mrs. Ramlow's eyes burned with fierce indignation. Her customary pallor deepened. "What nonsense! What are you, some sort of

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journalist? Is this all a hoax?"

"I'm not a journalist, but neither am I writing a book about Greek Revival houses. Although I could, all the research I've done preparing for this visit."

"Miss Slade, or whoever you are, I insist you leave my property at once."

"Not quite yet, although I've been bored to tears listening to your dreary saga of the Ramlows. Pride! Pride is all you care about, isn't it? You'd do anything, commit any sin, to protect your filthy pride."

As if she'd been struck a physical blow, Mrs. Ramlow leaned heavily against the low stone parapet. "You must be insane. Why are you doing this?"

"She was your pride, too, wasn't she? The hero husband and the perfect daughter. Only Miriam couldn't measure up to that ideal of perfection. Miriam ran away. Vanished, without a word."

"Stop!" Angry welts now suffused the chalky pampered flesh. "How *dare* you?"

"But she came back. Miriam came back and told you about the man. Some *nobody.* The wrong background. The wrong racial mixture. A man who ditched her, penniless and pregnant. The perfect daughter, gone astray, lost. Not something to brag about at tea parties in the rose garden. Not like the colonel's war record. And what did you do, Mrs. Ramlow? You threw her out. Disowned her. Soiled goods. Told her you'd rather she were dead. Her own *mother.* You even told people she was dead. Anyone with the temerity to ask about her. Drowned, you told them, in a boat accident on some nonexistent lake in a faraway country. Oh yes, I've done my homework, you see. And when she wrote to you when she was ill and all but destitute, you ignored her pleas for help. How could any mother, any human being, be so corrupted by false pride? Could anything be so monstrous, so evil?"

Mrs. Ramlow, with a strangled, animal cry of protest, clutched tightly at her stick and turned blindly away from the onslaught of bruising words.

Maria Slade continued in the same icy tone of contempt. "She never spoke of you until she was on her deathbed. That's when she told me the entire hideous story."

Mrs. Ramlow looked frantically across the treetops toward the house, which seemed, under the summer sun, a gleaming ghostly mirage. How could this be happening? On such a seemingly happy, ordinary day. How could anyone come here on such a flimsy pretext and treat her so cruelly? What had she done to deserve so vicious a verbal attack? If only this were Miriam herself confronting her she would have known how to respond, what to say that would disarm her. But to confide in a stranger? Never.

"I made up my mind to seek you out," said Maria Slade calmly. "Not to beg, not to crawl, not to demand what should be mine. Fat

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chance that would do any good. You stole my mother's birthright. What proof would I be able to show that I was your granddaughter? My mother destroyed everything that would have linked me to you. No, that's not why I came. That's not why I'm here."

Mrs. Ramlow struggled to regain the breath that would empower her to speak. "You don't understand," she said in a voice as weak as the rustle of dry leaves in a summer wind. "Listen, listen . . . you must listen to me . . ."

Maria Slade seized the silver-headed stick and raised it aloft, not fully knowing what she was about to do, but overcome by a sense of outrage and betrayal.

And then she was running with stumbling steps across the lawn and through the garden toward the two figures, Annie and the lawyer, sitting at the table under the striped umbrella.

"Oh, come quickly, come quickly! Something terrible has happened."

When the paramedics and the police had finally departed and the body of Enid Ramlow had been trundled away, a profound silence fell among the bereft trio that had remained as if frozen in shocked incomprehension around the table in the rose garden. What more was there to say after Maria Slade had told and retold her story of how Mrs. Ramlow had appeared to suffer an attack of dizziness and with outflung hands had failed to prevent herself from falling over the balustrade into the deep rocky pond in front of the grotto?

"It happened so fast. In the flash of a second. There was nothing I could do."

"It was a ghastly accident. You mustn't blame yourself, Miss Slade," Baldwin had tried to console her.

Mrs. Ramlow's doctor, who had arrived much too late to offer any assistance, came out of the house where he had been making a phone call. He agreed with Baldwin. "She had no business exerting herself, her heart being as weak as it was."

And now, Maria Slade having departed and Annie gone into the house to make the necessary phone calls, Stuart Baldwin and the doctor sat alone at the table. Presently, the doctor said, "What will happen now, Stuart, or am I being premature?"

"Well, this alters the situation. You know to what I refer, so far as our dear old friend's instructions were concerned. Of course, I'd counseled her not to make any rash decisions, but she could not be dissuaded. I'm afraid her mind was losing its grip. She *wanted* to believe her daughter was alive, which was quite absurd. A senile fantasy. She told me years ago that she had proof Miriam had drowned, although she was reluctant to reveal any details. Two weeks ago she insisted I rewrite her will leaving her estate to the daughter or, if she was dead, to whoever survived her. I brought the document with me today for her to sign. Now I can tear it up." ●

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Art by June Levine

The Voyeur

by Jeffery Deaver

He had no serious chance for her, of course.

She was way out of his league.

Still, Rodney Keller, forty-four both in age and in waistband, couldn't help being seduced by the sight of the Resident in 10B when she'd moved into his Santa Monica apartment complex six months ago. After all, a man can dream, can't he?

With focused hopes but diffuse energy, Keller had moved to L.A. from Des Moines two years ago to become a movie producer and spent months papering Tinseltown with his résumés. The results were unremarkable, and he finally concluded that success at selling Saturns and industrial air conditioners in the Midwest would never open doors at companies whose products included George Clooney and J. Lo.

But despite the rejection, Keller got into the Southern California groove, as he'd write to his parents. Sure, maybe folks out here were a little more superficial than in Iowa, and occasionally he felt like he was coasting. But what a place to be adrift! This was a promised land—wide highways, silky fog on the beach, sand between your toes, gigaplex movie theaters, all-night noodle restaurants, and a January low that matched the temperature of a typical

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May Day in Des Moines.

Keller shrugged off his failure to become a mogul, took a job as a manager at a chain bookstore in Westwood, and settled into a pleasant life.

He was content.

Well, almost. There was the love-life situation.

Keller was divorced, ten years, from a woman he'd married just after they'd graduated from State. After the breakup he'd dated some but had found that it was hard to connect on a serious level. None of the women he went out with, mostly blind dates, knew much at all about movies, his true passion in life. ("Oh, that is so weird, Rod, I love the classics, too. Like, I've seen *Steel Magnolias* a hundred times. I mean, I own it. . . . Now, tell me about this Orbison Welles guy you mentioned.") Generally conversation settled into boring bragging about their kids and rants about how badly their ex-husbands had treated them. His dates also tended to dress themselves at the unglamorous places like Gap or L.L. Bean and were generally of—how could he put it?—solid Midwestern builds.

The starred *PW* review of Jeffery Deaver's new thriller *Garden of Beasts* (Simon & Schuster) raves, "Deaver fans expect the unexpected from this prodigiously talented thriller writer. . . . [Deaver] doesn't disappoint with his 19th novel, this time offering a deliciously twisty tale set in Nazi Berlin. . . . Top Nazis, including Hitler and Goring, make colorful cameos. . . . This is prime Deaver, which means prime entertainment."

Oh, he met a few attractive women—like Sally Vaughn, the runner-up for Miss Iowa 2002, no less—but that relationship never went anywhere and after her he found himself longing for greener pastures in the girl department.

Which perfectly described L.A. Here was a massive inventory of the most gorgeous creatures on earth. But they weren't just pretty. No, these lasses also had substance. He'd overhear them in the coffee bar of the bookstore, sitting over skim lattes and talking art and politics, brilliant, animated, funny. Just yesterday he'd listened to a couple of twenty-somethings in tight-fitting workout clothes arguing about the odd-sounding instrument on the soundtrack of *The Third Man*. A dulcimer—no, it was an accordion—no, it was—

A zither! Keller had wanted to shout, but sensed an intrusion wouldn't be welcome (and sensed, too, that the one who'd been wrong would be royally pissed, putting the kibosh on any chance to hang out with either of them).

Your typical L.A. girl's tape collection surely wouldn't include any sappy tearjerkers. They'd have *The Bicycle Thief, The Man Who Knew Too Much, Battleship Potemkin, Wings of Desire, The Manchurian Candidate.*

Ah, but how to meet one . . . that was the problem. How he hated

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the cold leap, the Hi-My-Name's-Rod-What's-Yours stage. Pudgy, clumsy, shy, he always clutched.

He'd hoped his job at the bookstore would connect him with glamorous Hollywoodites. Put him in a situation where he had a purpose—like being a salesman—or where somebody came up to him. Then he could charm a woman with the best of them. But at the store, the instant he answered a customer's question, she had no more use for him. As for his fellow workers, they were either middle-aged losers or youngsters obsessed with their own careers (trying to—guess what—write, act in, or direct movies, of course).

Out of sheer exhaustion, Keller had given up on romance.

But then, three months ago, the Resident in 10B moved in.

Tammy Hudson—he'd asked the super her name the next morning—was a bit older than the stunning young things you'd see at Ivy or the back bar at the Beverly Wilshire. Keller put her at thirty-three or thirty-four, which was good, a manageable age gap. She was gorgeous. Long hair, black as a raven's wings, often tied up in a jaunty ponytail or pinned into a flirtatious bun. She was tall and, as her yellow-and-black Spandex jogging outfit proved, slim and muscular. She ran every day, and sometimes on his way to open the bookstore in the morning he'd see her in the backyard of the complex standing in the cool foggy air practicing some kind of martial art.

One other thing he liked: Tammy had a great joy of life. She traveled often and—based on what he'd overheard—had a place down in Baja, or knew someone who did; she often spent weekends there. She rode a bright red Vespa motor scooter, reminding him of Audrey Hepburn in *Roman Holiday.* Her auto was an old MG and she drove it lightning fast.

He hadn't been surprised to find that nearly every day she'd leave her apartment with her portfolio; of course she'd be involved in films. With her expressive face, she'd make a great character actor. Had he seen her in anything? he wondered. There were not many films Rodney Keller hadn't seen.

Keller debated, and decided it wasn't completely out of the question that they could go out and that something serious might develop between them. He wasn't really bad-looking. Too much gut, sure, but that was true of a lot of successful businessmen; women didn't mind, if you had the charm to offset it. He had a full head of brown hair, not a trace of gray, and a solid jaw that largely covered his double chin. He didn't smoke and drank only wine, and that in moderation. He always picked up the check at dinner.

But instantly, as always, the doubts swarmed like bees. How could the shy man meet her some way other than simply walking up and introducing himself? And once you've blown your initial chance, he knew all too well, you can't go back and start over again, not with a beautiful woman like Tammy.

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So for months Keller worshiped her from afar, struggling to come up with some way to break the ice and not make a fool of himself.

Then, this cool April evening, he got a break. Around seven, he was standing by his window, looking down into the courtyard, when he noticed motion from the bushes across the sidewalk from Tammy's bedroom. It was repeated a moment later, and this time he saw a faint flash of light, like a reflection off glass.

Keller shut his lights out and pulled the blinds down. Dropping to his knees, he peered outside and saw that a man was crouching in the bushes. He seemed to be staring into Tammy's window. He wore one of the gray uniforms of the apartment complex's groundskeepers. Keller rose and slipped into his bedroom, where he'd have a better view of the courtyard. Yes, there was no doubt. The skinny young guy was peeping. He had a small pair of binoculars. Goddamn pervert!

Keller's initial reaction was to call 9-1-1 and he grabbed the phone.

But he hit only the first digit, then thought, hold on . . . maybe he could use this somehow. He set the phone down.

Tammy's curtains closed. Keller focused on the voyeur and he felt a chill as the maintenance guy's shoulders slumped in disappointment—as if he'd been hoping to get a look at her stripping for the shower. Still, the man stayed in position, waiting for a chance to resume his spying. But then Tammy's door opened and she stepped outside. She was wearing her pink top and tight floral pants. Her blue leather Coach purse was over her shoulder and sunglasses rode high on her head, stuck into her hair, which was loose tonight.

The voyeur crouched down into the bushes, out of sight.

Tammy locked her door and walked down the sidewalk toward the parking lot. Where was the maintenance man? Keller wondered in alarm. Was he crawling closer to her? But just as Keller snatched up the phone again and started to push 9, he saw the stalker rise. He hadn't been about to pounce; he'd only been gathering up his tools. Carrying them, he turned away from Tammy and walked in the opposite direction, toward the back of the building.

Tammy disappeared into the lot, and a moment later the rattle of her MG engine and the whine of the gears filled the night as she sped away in the little green car.

That evening Keller stayed close to home, ordering out a pizza and keeping a close eye on the courtyard. Hours passed without any sign of Tammy or her stalker. He nearly fell asleep, but he made some coffee, drank it down black and hot, and forced himself to stay awake so he could scope out the courtyard. Reflecting, with a shiver of excitement, that this was just like the Hitchcock thriller *Rear Window,* where Jimmy Stewart, housebound in a wheelchair, spends his time peering through his neighbors' windows. It was Keller's favorite movie; he wondered if Tammy had

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ever seen it. He had a feeling she had.

At nine P.M., still seeing no sign of Tammy or the skinny voyeur, Keller went downstairs and around the back of his building, where he found the superintendent. He asked the man, "Who's that young maintenance guy? The blond."

"Blond?" the heavyset janitor asked, pulling a strand of greasy hair off his forehead. He smelled of beer.

"Yeah, the short guy."

"You said 'blond.'"

"Right, the one with blond hair," Keller said, frowning in frustration. "You understand who I mean?" The janitor was Anglo; there was no language barrier. Maybe he was just stupid.

"I thought, you called somebody 'the blond,' that meant a girl. Like, 'Look at the blond.' Nobody says that about a man. You don't call a man 'the blond.'"

Keller sighed. "Yeah? Well, I don't know about that. But he's blond. And short. He was trimming the hedges and raking today. You know who I mean?"

"Yeah, yeah. Him."

"What's his name?"

"I dunno. I didn't hire him. I don't do the grounds work. The board hired him."

"What's his story?"

"Story? He sweeps up, he rakes, he cuts the grass. That's the story. Why?"

"He works for a service?"

"Yeah, a service. I guess."

"Is the company bonded?"

"That he works for?"

"Yeah, that company."

"I guess. I told you it was the board—"

"Hired him. I know. So you don't know anything about him."

"Why?"

"Just curious."

The super waddled back to his apartment, frowning as if he'd been wrongly accused of something, and Keller hurried back upstairs.

At one A.M. Tammy returned. Looking as vibrant and sexy as when she'd left, she walked to her door and unlocked it. With a look over her shoulder, she stepped inside and slammed the door shut.

She'd seemed a bit uneasy at the doorstep, Keller decided, as if she'd seen or heard an intruder, and so he grabbed some binoculars and scanned the bushes. It didn't seem that the peeper was back, but he wasn't going to take any chances. He stepped into the hallway and padded downstairs. He stood in the shadows near the stand of bushes where the voyeur had perched earlier to play his sick game.

Flies buzzed, lights flickered through the bushes, and Keller

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could hear the distant howl of coyotes in the hills on the way to Malibu. But the scene was otherwise quiet and still.

No sign of the maintenance man.

After Tammy's lights went out, Keller waited a half-hour and, seeing nothing but the resident tomcat prowl past, returned to his apartment, vaguely aware that this situation could be a gold mine for his love life, but wondering how best to exploit it.

Well, the first thing to consider: Was the guy a serious threat? Keller'd heard that voyeurs were like exhibitionists and people with foot fetishes. They weren't generally dangerous. They substitute the emotionally distant—and, to them, safer—act of watching men or women and fantasizing about them for normal sexual relationships, even though they think they want the latter.

It was true, of course, that rapists would sometimes spy on their victims to learn their habits and patterns before assaulting them, but the vast majority of voyeurs would never even think of speaking to their victims, much less assaulting them. The odds were that the groundskeeper was harmless. Besides, he was a slim, meek-looking little punk. With her karate training, Tammy could deck him with a single jab. No, Keller decided, there was little risk to the woman if he didn't blow the whistle on the stalker just yet.

Keller fell into bed. He closed his eyes, but was unable to fall asleep; his overheated brain continued to wrestle with the problem of how to parlay the stalking into a chance to ask Tammy out. Tossing uncomfortably, he beat the alarm to sleep by half an hour. When it blared on at seven, he stumbled out of bed and looked outside. The lights were on in Tammy's apartment. He pictured her doing her morning workout or enjoying a breakfast of yogurt and berries and herbal tea, content in her ignorance of the stalker.

And of him, Keller saw nothing.

This was troubling. Had this apartment complex been just a one-day assignment for the guy? What if he never returned? That would ruin all of Keller's plans.

He remained at the window for as long as he could, hoping for the maintenance man's return. But at eight, he could wait no longer; he had to be at work in fifteen minutes.

Keller showered fast and staggered outside to the parking lot, head aching from the lack of sleep, eyes stinging in the fierce sunlight. He was just about to get into his battered Saturn when a Pacific Landscaping Services pickup truck pulled into the lot.

Keller held his breath.

Yes, it was the stalker! Ignoring Keller, he climbed out, collected his tools and a drink cooler, and headed toward the courtyard. Keller stepped behind his car and crouched down. The voyeur slipped into the same bushes where he'd kept his vigil yesterday and started to clip a hedge that was already perfectly trimmed.

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His hungry eyes didn't even glance at the clippers; they were focused on Tammy's bedroom window.

Thank you, Keller offered to the God his Midwest upbringing suggested might exist, and hurried back to his apartment, taking the back path to stay out of the stalker's view. He was supposed to open the bookstore, but he wasn't going to pass up this chance. He pulled out his cell phone and called the Human Resources director of the store. He faked a raspy voice and told her that he was sick; he wouldn't be coming in.

"Oh," she said uncertainly. Keller remembered that the other assistant manager was scheduled to start vacation today, which meant the HR woman'd have a hell of a time finding somebody who could open the store. Keller coughed hard but the woman offered no sympathy. She said coolly, "Let me know if you'll be in tomorrow. Give me a little more warning next time."

"I—"

Click.

Keller shrugged. He had more important things to worry about. As he walked to his apartment he was running through some of the plans he'd been thinking of as he lay in bed last night.

"Hi, you don't know me but I live across the way. I just thought you should know . . ."

Or maybe: "Hi, I'm your neighbor. Don't think we've met. Don't want to alarm you but there's a man in those bushes who's been staring at you for two days."

No, don't say two days. She'd wonder why he didn't say anything earlier.

"Listen, miss, you don't know me, but don't look around. There's a man in those bushes across the walk. He's been staring at your apartment with some binoculars. I think he's a stalker or something."

But after some debate he decided he didn't like any of those approaches. She might just respond by saying, "Oh, thanks," then closing the door on him and calling the cops.

End of Rodney Keller.

No, he needed to do something dramatic—something that would impress a woman as sleek and cool and, well, unimpressible as Tammy Hudson surely was.

Squinting into the courtyard, Keller saw that the voyeur had moved closer to her apartment, eyes still focused obsessively on her window. The sunlight glinted off the blades of the clippers and Keller could hear the ominous *swick, swick* of the tool, which was long and seemed well-honed. He wondered if his earlier assessment had been wrong. Maybe this guy was dangerous.

Which finally gave him the idea—how to best orchestrate an introduction to the beautiful Resident in 10B.

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Keller rose and walked to his closet, rummaged through it, and finally found his old baseball bat. He'd never been much for sports, but he'd bought a bat and glove when he'd been hired at the bookstore and learned that they had a team. He'd thought it would be a good way to meet some of the girl clerks. As it turned out, though, the only players were guys and he soon dropped off the team.

A glance outside—no sign of Tammy, though the voyeur was still there, clipping away fervently with the shears.

Swick, swick . . .

Gripping the bat, Keller left his apartment and slipped downstairs to the first-floor walkway, then edged quietly to the shadows behind the stalker.

His plan was to wait until Tammy left for her regular morning auditions. As soon as she passed the voyeur, Keller would jog up to the man, brandish the bat, and shout to her to call the police, this man was stalking her.

He'd make the guy lie on his belly until the cops arrived; he and Tammy would have a good ten minutes to talk.

No, no, it was nothing . . . My name's Rod Keller, by the way. And you're . . . ? . . . Nice to meet you, Tammy. . . . No, really, just being a good citizen. . . . Well, okay then, tell you what, if you really want to repay me, you can let me take you out to dinner.

Wiping his sweating hand on his slacks, he got a firmer grip on the taped bat handle.

Sure, Saturday'd work for me. Maybe—

The opening front door of Tammy's apartment interrupted the fantasy.

She stepped outside and pulled her expensive shades down over her eyes. Today, her black hair sported a bright red headband, which matched her finger- and toenail polish. She had her blue purse over her shoulder and was carrying her portfolio. She started down the walk.

The voyeur tensed. The clipping ceased.

Keller gripped the bat harder yet. He took a deep breath, rehearsed his lines once more.

Ready, set . . .

But then the voyeur stepped back. He set down the clippers and began fumbling with the front of his overalls.

What—?

Oh, Jesus, he was unzipping himself and reaching inside.

He's going to rape her!

"No!" Keller shouted and ran forward, waving the bat over his head.

"Hey!" The rapist blinked in panic and stumbled back, tripping over a small wicket fence around a mulch bed. He landed hard and cried out in pain, his breath knocked out of his lungs, gasping.

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Tammy stopped, turning toward the commotion, frowning.

Keller yelled to her, "Call the police! This guy's been watching you. He's a rapist!" He turned back to the blond man, waving the bat. "Don't move! I'll—"

His words were cut off by the stunning explosion of gunshots from directly behind him.

Keller howled in panic and dropped to his knees as the bullets slammed into the stalker's head and neck, leaving a bloody mist around him. He shivered once and slumped to the ground, dead.

"Christ!" Keller whispered in shock and slowly rose to his feet. He turned toward Tammy and frowned in astonishment to see her holding a large black pistol, which she'd pulled out of her Coach purse. She was crouching and looking around like a soldier in an ambush.

So she didn't just study karate for self-protection; she had a license to carry a gun, too. Well, a lot of women in L.A. did, he'd heard. On the other hand, Keller wasn't sure you could just shoot a man who was lying harmlessly on the ground, when he hadn't actually attacked you.

"Hey, you," Tammy called, stepping closer.

Keller turned. He got a good look at the woman's beautiful blue eyes and her diamond earrings sparkling in the sun, and he smelled a flowery perfume mixed with the acrid firecracker smell of smoke from the gun.

"Me?" he asked.

"Yeah, here." She handed the portfolio to him.

"This's for me?"

But she didn't answer. She turned away and sprinted into the alley behind the apartment complex, a flash of vivacious color that vanished an instant later.

As Keller was staring in confusion at the portfolio, he heard a rustle of feet behind him and an instant later was grabbed by a half-dozen massive hands. The next thing he knew, he was being slammed face-first into a patch of extremely well-raked lawn.

Tammy Hudson, Rodney Keller learned from his lawyer, was one of Southern California's most successful, and most elusive, drug dealers.

It seemed that she'd been responsible for importing thousands of pounds of high-quality cocaine from Mexico over the past year. (Hence her frequent trips south of the border.) Driving a beat-up old sports car and living in a pathetic place like the Pacific Arms Apartments kept her off the radar screen of DEA and police officials, who found it easier to find and track the high-living kingpins in Beverly Hills and Palm Springs.

Sitting in the L.A. detention center across from Keller, the lawyer now delivered the bad news that the D.A. had no intention

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of dropping any of the charges against him.

"But I didn't do anything," Keller whined.

The lawyer, a tanned forty-year-old with a fringe of curly hair, gave a chuckle, as if he'd heard that line ten thousand times. He continued, explaining that the prosecutor was out for blood. For one thing, a cop had been killed; the blond man, the apparent voyeur, had actually been an undercover LAPD officer pretending to work for the landscape-maintenance company. His job was to report whenever Tammy left the apartment. Other officers or DEA agents would then take over surveillance and follow her in unmarked cars or vans. (When Keller thought that he was reaching into his pants in preparation for a rape, the officer was in fact merely fishing his radio out of an inside pocket to tell the other surveillance team that she was leaving.)

"But—"

"Let me finish." The lawyer added that the cops were also outraged that, because of Keller, Tammy had successfully escaped. She'd disappeared completely, and the FBI and DEA believed she was probably out of the country by now.

"But they can't think I was working with her! Is that what they think?"

"In a word, yeah." He went on to say that Keller's explanation for the past several days' events raised eyebrows. "To put it mildly." For instance, the police were curious why, if he'd noticed the supposed voyeur the day before, he hadn't told her then. If his concern, as he claimed, was for an innocent woman's safety, why didn't he tell her she was in danger when he'd first found out about it?

His red-faced explanation that he wanted to use the voyeur as an excuse to introduce himself to Tammy was greeted with an expression in the lawyer's eyes that could be read as either scepticism or embarrassment for a pathetic client. The man recorded this explanation in a few anemic notes.

And why would he lie to his employer about being sick today? To the police, that made sense only if he was serving as Tammy's lookout. Today's was to be a big drug transfer and they reasoned that Keller had stayed home to make sure Tammy got away safely to deliver the goods. Their theory was that Keller had figured the maintenance worker for law and attacked him to give Tammy the chance to flee.

Physical evidence, too: Both his fingerprints and hers were on the portfolio, which happened to contain no headshot photos or audition tapes but rather a kilo of very pure cocaine. "She gave it to me," he'd said weakly. "To create a diversion, I'll bet. So she could escape."

The lawyer didn't even bother to write that one down.

But most damning of all was the problem with his claim that he didn't know her. "See," his lawyer said, "if you really didn't know

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her or have any connection with her, we might get a jury to believe everything else you're claiming."

"But I don't know her. I swear."

The attorney gave a faint wince. "See, Rodney, there's a problem with that."

"I prefer 'Rod.' Like I've said."

"A problem."

"What?" Keller scratched his head; the cuffs jingled like dull bells.

"They searched your apartment."

"Oh. They did? They can do that?"

A laugh. "You were arrested on felony murder, assault, aiding and abetting, and drug charges. Yes, Rod, they can do that."

"Oh."

"And you know what they found?"

He knew perfectly well what they found. He sat back, stared at the floor, and played absently with the handcuffs as the lawyer read from a sheet of paper.

"Some old Yoplait containers with Tammy's fingerprints on them, ditto two wine bottles, a box of herbal tea, and empty strawberry cartons. Magazines with her name on the address label. A charge-card receipt of hers from a store in the Beverly Center. A Starbucks cup with her lipstick and DNA on the rim."

"DNA? They checked that, did they?"

"That's what cops do."

"I swear, she was never in my apartment. All that stuff . . . I just . . . I kind of . . . picked it up in her trash."

"Her trash?"

"I just saw some things out behind her apartment. I didn't think it was a big deal."

"You had two dozen snapshots of her on your dresser."

"I just took a few candids is all. She wasn't looking at the camera—you can tell the cops that. If I knew her, she'd be looking at the camera, wouldn't she?"

"Rod."

"No, listen! If we had been together somewhere, she'd be looking at me, looking into the lens." Keller's voice broke in desperation. "Like, 'Say, "Cheese," ' you know? But she wasn't. That means we weren't together. It's just logic. Doesn't that make sense?" He fell silent. After a moment he added, "I just wanted to meet her. I didn't know how."

"They found some binoculars, too. They figured you used those to keep an eye on her door to warn her if anybody was going to raid her place."

"That was just so I could . . . so I could look at her. She's really pretty." Keller shrugged. His eyes returned to the floor.

"I think the only thing we can do is talk to the D.A. about a plea bargain. We don't want to go to trial on this one, believe me. I may

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be able to get you a deal for fifteen, twenty years. . . ."

"Twenty years?"

"I'll talk to them. See what they say."

The lawyer stepped to the door of the interview room and rapped on it to summon the guard. A moment later it opened.

"One thing," Keller said.

His attorney turned and lifted an eyebrow.

"Sally Vaughn."

"Who?"

"A runner-up for Miss Iowa. Few years ago."

"What about her?"

"I sold her a car and we went out once, but she wasn't interested in seeing me anymore. The same thing sort of happened with her."

"Same thing?"

"Like with Tammy. I was kind of watching her more than I should have."

"Peeping?"

He started to object to the word, but then nodded. "I got arrested. That's why I moved here. I wanted to start over. Meet somebody for real."

"What was your sentence in Iowa?"

"Six months suspended, counseling for a year."

"It didn't take, the counseling."

"Didn't take, no."

"I'll get the records. The D.A. might buy it. But he lost a prime perp because of you, so he's going to want something. Probably stalking and privacy charges. You'd have to do a year, eighteen months, I'd guess."

"Better than twenty."

"I'll see what I can do." The lawyer stepped through the door.

"One other question?" Keller asked, looking up.

"What?"

"Will the police use all of those things they found? For evidence?"

"From your apartment?"

"Right."

"Probably not. They usually pick the best ones."

"Then you think I could have a couple of the pictures of Tammy to put up on my wall here? There's no window. There's nothing to look at."

The lawyer hesitated, as if he was waiting to see if Keller was joking. When he concluded that apparently the prisoner wasn't, he said, "You know, Rodney, that's probably not the best idea in the world."

"Just a thought."

The attorney left and a large guard stepped inside. He took Rodney Keller by the arm and led him to the corridor that would take him back to his cell. ●

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SNOWBALL IN JULY

by Ellery Queen

The following story represents well the virtuosity of Frederic Dannay and Manfred B. Lee, for it shows that they could manage clever plotting and evocative writing in only a few short pages just as they could at novel length. We will be reprinting more of the Ellery Queen stories, as well as one of the radio plays from the 1940s, in some of the other upcoming centenary issues. This story is a favorite of Edward D. Hoch's. ¶

At playful moments Diamond Jim Grady liked to refer to himself as a magician, a claim no one disputed—least of all the police. Grady's specialty was jewel robbery at gunpoint, a branch of felonious vaudeville which he had elevated to an art form. His heists were miracles of advance information, timing, teamwork, and deception. And once he got his hands on the loot it vanished with the speed of light, to be seen no more in the shape the manufacturing jeweler had wrought.

Grady's most spectacular trick was keeping himself and his fellow artists out of jail. He would drill his small company without mercy in the wisdom of keeping their mugs covered, their mitts gloved, and their traps shut while on stage. There was rarely a slip in his performances; when one occurred, the slipping assistant disappeared. As Diamond Jim reasonably pointed out, "What witness can identify a slob that ain't here?"

Grady might have gone on forever collecting other people's pretties and driving the law and insurance companies mad, but he pulled one trick too many.

In explanation, it is necessary to peep into Diamond Jim's love life. Lizbet had been his big moment for two years and ten months—a slim eye-stopper as golden and glittery as any choice piece in his collection. Now, in underworld society a romantic attachment of almost three years' duration is equivalent to an epic passion, and Lizbet may be forgiven the folly of having developed delusions of permanence. Unfortunately, that was not all she

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developed; include an appetite for pizza pies and French ice cream, and along with it her figure. So one night, when Grady's bloated eye cased the dainty anatomy of Maybellene, pivot girl of the Club Swahili line, that was all for Lizbet.

One of Grady's staff, a lovelorn lapidary who could grind an ax as well as a diamond, tipped Lizbet the bad news from a phone booth in the Swahili men's room even as Diamond Jim prepared toothily to escort Maybellene home.

Lizbet was revolted at the perfidy of man. She also realized that unless she lammed with great rapidity her life was not worth the crummiest bangle on the junk counter of the nearest Five-and-Dime. She knew far, far too many of Diamond Jim's professional secrets; she even knew where a couple of bodies—of ex-slobs—were buried.

So Lizbet took barely the time to grab an old summer mink and a fistful of unaltered mementos from Grady's latest personal appearance before she did an impromptu vanishing act of her own.

Immediately Lizbet became the most popular girl in town. Everybody wanted her, especially the police and Grady. The smart money, doping past performances strictly, was on Grady, but this time the smart money took a pratfall. Lizbet was not in town at all. She was in Canada, where—according to every Royal Northwest movie Lizbet had ever seen—the Mounties were large and incorruptible and a girl could think without worrying about stopping a shiv in her back. Having thought, Lizbet slung the summer mink about her plump shoulders, taxied to the nearest police station, and demanded protection and immunity in exchange for a pledge to take the witness stand back home and talk herself, if need be, into lockjaw. And she insisted on being ushered into a cell while Montreal got in touch with New York.

The long-distance negotiations took twenty-four hours—just long enough for the news to leak out and inundate the front pages of the New York newspapers.

"So now Grady knows where she is," fumed Inspector Queen. He was on special assignment in charge of the case. "He'll go for her sure. She told Piggott and Hesse when they flew up to Montreal that she can even drape a first-degree murder rap around Grady's fat neck."

"Me," said Sergeant Velie gloomily, "I wouldn't give a plugged horsecar token for that dame's chances of getting back to New York with a whole hide."

"What is he, a jet pilot?" asked Ellery. "Fly her down."

"She won't fly—has a fear of heights," snapped his father. "It's on the level, Ellery. Lizbet's the only girlfriend Grady ever had who turned down a penthouse."

"Train or car, then," said Ellery. "What's the hassle?"

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"A train he'd make hash out of," said Sergeant Velie, "and a car he'd hijack some truck to run off the road into a nice thousand-foot hole."

"You're romancing."

"Maestro, you don't know Grady!"

"Then you're tackling this hind end to," said Ellery negligently.

"Dad, have Grady and his gang picked up on some charge and locked in a cell. By the time they're sprung, his woman can be safe on ice somewhere in Manhattan."

"On ice is where she'll wind up," said Sergeant Velie.

When Ellery found that Diamond Jim had anticipated interference and disappeared with his entire company, including Maybellene, a more respectful glint came into his eye.

"Let's pull a trick or two of our own. Grady will assume that you'll get Lizbet to New York as quickly as possible. He knows she won't fly and that you wouldn't risk the long car trip. So he'll figure she'll be brought down by rail. Since the fastest way by rail is a through express, it's the crack Montreal train he'll be gunning for. Does he know Piggott and Hesse by sight?"

"Let's say he does," said Inspector Queen, perking up notwithstanding the heat, "and I see what you mean. I'll fly Johnson and Goldberg up there along with a policewoman of Lizbet's build and general appearance. Piggott and Hesse take the policewoman onto the Special, heavily veiled, while Goldie and Johnson hustle Lizbet onto a slow train—"

"You think this Houdini plays with potsies?" demanded Sergeant Velie. "You got to do better than that, my masters."

"Oh, come, Sergeant, he's only flesh and blood," said Ellery soothingly. "Anyway, we're going to do better than that. To befuddle him completely, somewhere along the route we'll have her taken off and complete the trip by automobile. In fact, Dad, we'll take her off ourselves—the three of us. Feel better, Velie?"

But the Sergeant shook his head. "You don't know Grady."

So Detectives Goldberg and Johnson and an ex-chorus girl named Policewoman Bruusgaard flew to Montreal, and at the zero hour Detectives Piggott and Hesse ostentatiously spirited Policewoman Bruusgaard—veiled and sweltering in Lizbet's own mink—into a drawing room on the Canadian Limited. Thirty minutes after the Limited rolled out of the terminal Detectives Johnson and Goldberg, attired as North Country backwoodsmen and lugging battered suitcases, swaggered behind Lizbet into the smoking car of a sooty, suffocating all-coach local-express entitled laughingly in the timetables The Snowball. Lizbet was in dowdy clothes, her coiffure was now blue-black, and her streaming face, scrubbed clean of heavy makeup, seemed a sucker's bet to fool even Grady—so many wrinkles and crow's-feet showed.

And the game was en route.

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For on a sizzling hot morning in July two unmarked squad cars set out from Center Street, Manhattan, for upstate New York. In one rode the Queens and Sergeant Velie, in the other six large detectives.

The Sergeant drove lugubriously. "It won't work," he predicted. "He operates practically by radar. And he can spot and grease an itchy palm from nine miles up. I tell you Grady's got this up his sleeve right now."

"You croak like a witch doctor with bellyache," remarked Inspector Queen, squirming in his damp clothes. "Just remember, Velie, if we don't get to Wapaug with time to spare—"

Wapaug was a whistle stop on the C. & N. Y. Railroad. It consisted of several simmering coal piles, a straggly single street, and a roasted-looking cubby of a station. The two cars drove up to the brown little building and the Inspector and Ellery went inside. No one was in the hotbox of a waiting room but an elderly man wearing sleeve garters and an eye-shade who was poking viciously at the innards of a paralyzed electric fan.

"What's with The Snowball?"

"Number 113? On time, mister."

"And she's due—?"

"10:18."

"Three minutes," said Ellery. "Let's go." The cars had drawn up close, one at each end of the platform. Two of the six detectives were leaning exhaustedly against an empty handtruck. Otherwise, the baked platform was deserted.

They all squinted north. 10:18 came. 10:18 went. At 10:20 they were still squinting north. The stationmaster was in the doorway now, also squinting north.

"Hey!" rasped Inspector Queen, swatting a mosquito. "Where was that train on time last?"

" At Grove Junction." The stationmaster peered up the tracks, which looked as if they had just come out of a blast furnace. "Where the yards and roundhouse are. It's the all-train stop two stations north."

"Train 113 stops at the next station north, too, doesn't she? Marmion? Did you get a report on her from Marmion?"

"I was just gonna check, mister." They followed him back into the hotbox and the elderly man put on his slippery headphones and got busy with the telegraph key. "Marmion stationmaster says she pulled in and out on time, Left Marmion 10:12."

"On time at Marmion," said Ellery, "and it's only a six-minute run from Marmion to Wapaug—" He wiped his neck.

"Funny," fretted his father. It was now 10:22. "How could she lose four minutes on a six-minute run? Even on this railroad?"

"Somethin's wrong," said the stationmaster, blowing the sweat off his eyeshade band. He turned suddenly to his key.

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The Queens went back to the platform to stare up the local track toward Marmion. After a moment Ellery hurried back into the waiting room.

"Stationmaster, could she have switched to the express track at Marmion and gone right through Wapaug without stopping?" He knew the answer in advance, since they had driven along the railroad for miles in their approach to Wapaug; but his brains were frying.

"Nothin's gone through southbound on these tracks since 7:38 this mornin'."

Ellery hurried out again, fingering his collar. His father was sprinting up the platform toward the squad car. The two detectives had already rejoined their mates in the other car and it was roaring up the highway, headed north.

"Come on!" shouted Inspector Queen. Ellery barely made it before Sergeant Velie sent the car rocketing toward the road. "Somehow Grady got onto the trick—a smear, a leak! He's waylaid The Snowball between here and Marmion!"

They kept watching the ties. The automobile road paralleled the railroad at a distance of barely twenty feet, with nothing between but gravel.

And there was no sign of a passenger train, in motion or standing still, wrecked or whole. Or of a freight, or even a handcar. Headed south—or, for that matter, headed north.

They almost shot through Marmion before they realized that they had covered the entire distance between the two stations. The other car was parked below the weathered eaves of an even smaller shed than the one at Wapaug. As they twisted back in reverse, four of the detectives burst out of the little station.

"She left Marmion at 10:12, all right, Inspector!" yelled one. "Stationmaster says we're crazy. We must have missed it!"

The two cars raced back toward Wapaug.

Inspector Queen glared at the rails flashing alongside. "Missed it? A whole passenger train? Velie, slow down!"

"That Grady," moaned Sergeant Velie.

Ellery almost devoured a knuckle, saying nothing. He kept staring at the glittering rails. They winked back, jeering. It was remarkable how straight this stretch of track between Marmion and Wapaug was, how uncluttered by scenery. Not a tree or building beside the right of way. No water anywhere—not so much as a rain puddle. No curves, no grades; no sidling spur line, tunnel, bridge. Not a gully, gorge, or ravine. And no sign of wreckage. . . . The rails stretched, perfect and unburdened, along the floor of the valley. For all the concealment or trickery possible, they might have been a series of parallel lines drawn with a ruler on a sheet of blank paper.

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And there was Wapaug's roasted little station again.

And no Snowball.

The inspector's voice cracked. "She pulls into Grove Junction on time. She gets to Marmion on time. She pulls out of Marmion on time. But she doesn't show up at Wapaug. Then she's got to be between Marmion and Wapaug! What's wrong with that?" He challenged them, hopefully, to find something wrong with it.

Sergeant Velie accepted. "Only one thing," he said in a hollow voice. "She ain't."

That did it. "I suppose Grady's palmed it!" screamed his superior. "That train's between Marmion and Wapaug somewhere, and I'm going to find it or—or buy me a ouija board!"

So back they went to Marmion, driving along the railroad at ten miles per hour. And then they turned around and crept Wapaug-ward again, to shuffle into the waiting room and look piteously at the stationmaster. But that railroad man was sitting in his private oven mopping his chafed forehead and blinking at the shimmering valley through his north window.

No one said a word for some time.

When the word came, everyone leaped. "Stationmaster!" said Ellery. "Get your Marmion man on the key again. Find out if, after leaving Marmion at 10:12, *The Snowball didn't turn back.*"

"Back?" The elderly man brightened. "Sure!" He seized his telegraph key.

"That's it, Ellery!" cried Inspector Queen. "She left Marmion southbound all right, but then she backed up north past Marmion again for a repair, and I'll bet she's in the Grove Junction yards or roundhouse right now!"

"Grove Junction says," whispered the stationmaster, "that she ain't in their yards or roundhouse and never was—just went through on time. And Marmion says 113 pulled out southbound and didn't come back."

All were silent once more.

Then the inspector slapped at a dive-bombing squadron of blue-bottle flies, hopping on one foot and howling, "But how can a whole train disappear? Snowball! Snowball in July! What did Grady do, melt her down for ice water?"

"And drank her," said Sergeant Velie, licking his lips.

"Wait," said Ellery. "Wait . . . I know where The Snowball is!" He scuttled toward the door. "And if I'm right we'd better hurry—or kiss Lizbet goodbye!"

"But *where?*" implored Inspector Queen as the two cars flashed north again, toward Marmion.

"Down Grady's gullet," shouted the Sergeant, wrestling his wheel.

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"That's what he wanted us to think," shouted Ellery in reply. "Faster, Sergeant! Train leaves Marmion and never shows up at the next station south, where we're waiting to take Lizbet off. Vanishes without a trace. Between Marmion and Wapaug there's nothing at all to explain what could have happened to her—no bridge to fall from, no water or ravine to fall into, no tunnel to hide in, no anything—just a straight line on flat bare country. Marvelous illusion. Only the same facts that give it the appearance of magic also explain it. . . . No, Velie, don't slow down," Ellery yelled as the dreary little Marmion station came into view. "Keep going north—*past* Marmion!"

"North past Marmion?" said his father, bewildered. "But the train came *through* Marmion, Ellery, then headed south . . ."

"The Snowball's nowhere south of Marmion, is it? And from the facts it's a physical impossibility for her to be anywhere south of Marmion. So she *isn't* south of Marmion, Dad. *She never went through Marmion at all.*"

"But the Marmion stationmaster said—"

"What Grady bribed him to say! It was all a trick to keep us running around in circles between Marmion and Wapaug, while Grady and his gang held up the train *between Marmion and Grove Junction!* Isn't that gunfire up ahead? We're still in time!"

And there, four miles north of Marmion, where the valley entered the foothills, cowered The Snowball, frozen to the spot. A huge trailer-truck dumped athwart the local tracks had stopped her, and judging from the gun flashes the train was under bombardment of half a dozen bandits hidden in the woods nearby.

Two figures, one lying still and the other crawling toward the woods dragging a leg, told them that the battle was not one-sided. From two of the shattered windows of a railroad car a stream of bullets poured into the woods. What Grady & Co. had not known was that Northwoodsmen Goldberg and Johnson had carried in their battered suitcases two submachine guns and a large supply of ammunition.

When the carful of New York detectives broke out their arsenal and cut loose, the Grady gang dropped their weapons and trudged out with their arms held high . . .

Ellery and Inspector Queen found Lizbet on the floor of the smoking car with assorted recumbent passengers, in a litter of hot cartridge shells, while Detectives Johnson and Goldberg prepared rather shakily to enjoy a couple of king-size cigarettes.

"You all right, young woman?" asked the inspector anxiously. "Anything I can get you?"

Lizbet looked up out of a mess of dyed hair, gunsmoke, sweat, and tears. "You said it, pop—that witness chair!" ●

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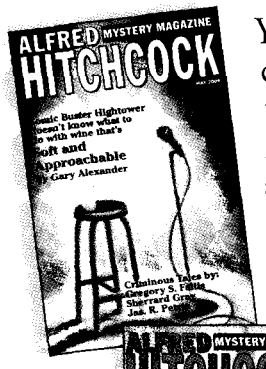

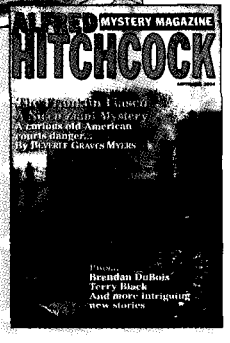

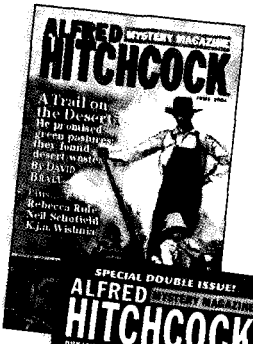

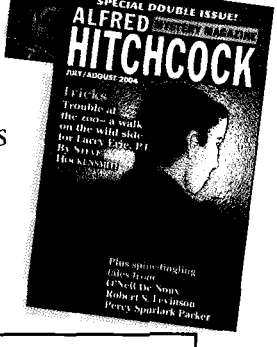

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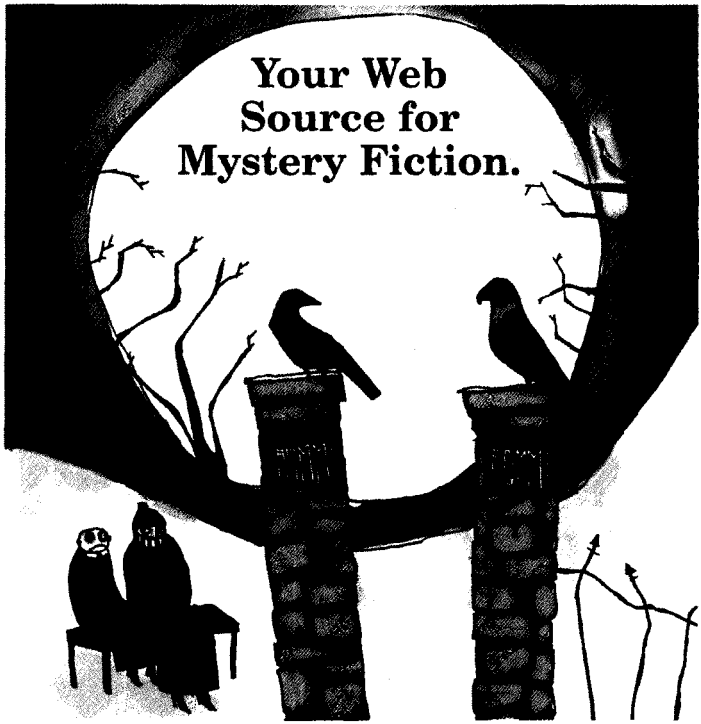

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